MAMAS, MAMMIES, AND ABSENTEE MOTHERS: MODERNIZING THE PORTRAYAL OF SOUTHERN MOTHERHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY CHICK FLICKS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the budding radical image of motherhood in three female-centered films, also known as chick flicks, which take place in the American South. The three films, *Steel Magnolias*, *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, and *Secret Life of Bees*, center on groups of female friends dealing with motherhood and maternity in varying forms and degrees. Each film depicts archetypal women, specifically mothers, expected in texts placed in the South: the angel in the household, the absentee mother, and the mammy figure. Though the individual stories in the films differ, the parallel theme of a woman concerned with raising a daughter in the South with the help of her female friends is consistent. The women rely on each other for support and guidance, particularly in relation to mothering. The presence of these women results in the complex concept of motherhood as a group effort, rather than traditional perception of motherhood as one woman being the perfect mother. In addition, the films begin to reveal further movement towards a matriarchal South with the appearance of maternal based religions that denounce the patriarchal foundation of Christianity, which is so prevalent in the South. This thesis argues that these chick flicks are presenting a more complex, modern representation of southern motherhood and southern women in general. They are able to do so by using the stereotypes the audience expects of a southern film, while simultaneously inserting matriarchal and female empowerment through female camaraderie, ultimately creating a New South.
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this in memory of my own mother, Ellen Rogers.
INTRODUCTION

The South is a place that conjures up a wide range of emotions. Some view it as a region of the United States that brings embarrassment and shame to the rest of the country because of the oppressive constraints southerners have often exhibited throughout history. Others, often southerners, believe the South represents a way of life that has been taken for granted and altered over the years. Regardless of personal opinion on the South, it is difficult to deny that it is still a region of America that creates a feeling of mystery and intrigue.

One of the pulsating themes in southern culture is the importance and presence of family. The archetypal plantation southern family in texts of varying kinds is one that is close and heavily involved in each other’s lives. These idyllic families can be seen from the birth of the South to the present. A key element in these families is the presence of a matriarch. The mothers in southern white families that have been depicted in literature, television, film, and pop culture are often portrayed as the perfect mother; a mother who devotes her life and time to her family. This image of a perfect mother stems from the idealized image that many have of the South, and the importance that southerners give in relation to hospitality, manners, and charm. As a southern woman raised by a southern mother, I find these portrayals to be flat and grossly inaccurate, but still incredibly interesting. This need to cling to the romanticized image of the South is one that I feel is still present, but is also coming under investigation by scholars and critics alike.

This thesis argues that this overly simplified depiction of mothers and their children, particularly their daughters, is still present in our culture. However, over time the two-dimensional structure of the mother-daughter relationship has begun to mature and is attempting to show the complexities that emerge from being a mother and a daughter in the South. The three films I will examine are Steel Magnolias (1989), The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood
(2002), and *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008). These films are significant to the study of the portrayal of southern mothers in contemporary culture because they represent the image that is being sent out and absorbed by the general population.

Even though these three films appear to take on the archetypal or caricaturized images of the southern mother and southern motherhood that are so often seen in films, texts, and popular culture, they all three attempt to modernize the notion of what it means to be a woman and mother in the South in varying degrees. Each film superficially exhibits the same characters so frequently seen in southern pop culture: the hyper-feminine, self sacrificing mother; the mother who did not know she wanted to be a mother, but ultimately embraces her role; the black woman who takes on the responsibility of raising a white child who is in no way her own. However, it is these stereotyped images so frequently related to the Old South that allows for a complication of motherhood. By incorporating archetypes, the filmmakers are able to reach the intended audience consisting of generations of women by creating characters that the audience can see themselves in. Once these characters garner the audience’s attention through use of the familiar, the films are able to create complexity. Each one of these portrayals of motherhood and southern women can continue to be seen in films and texts today; however, these films do something that many of their counterparts do not. They attempt to reframe the common belief in motherhood as something that one woman does on her own to something that connects women in the South and is a group responsibility. These films look at the possibility and likelihood that often there are many women raising daughters in the South, that these connections and relationships between women are often more important than the other relationships in their lives, and that these other women allow for the connection between the mother and daughter to be greatly and vastly improved. While each one of these films eventually succumbs to the “Hollywood ending” and
the expected fulfillment of roles for each one of the standard portrayals of motherhood, each film is still attempting to create a more contemporary vision of southern mothers by flirting with more modern concepts of what it means to be a participant in a mother-daughter relationship.

The topic of motherhood, particularly southern motherhood, is one that is frequently focused on in relation to literature and literary studies. With famous southern women writers ranging from Alice Walker and Harriet Jacobs to Kate Chopin and Flannery O’Connor, exploring motherhood and the relationship of mother to child is a common theme for women writers from the South. These contemporary southern female writers are able to explore southern femaleness in a way that previous writers have been unable to accomplish. In *Southern Mothers: Facts and Fictions in Southern Women’s Writing*, authors Nagueyalti Warren and Sally Wolff suggest, “While images of mothers have often reflected the male perspective, women writers, particularly of the present day, have found that they can reject the romanticized male view and take responsibility for defining themselves and finding their own means of expression” (2). The fact that southern writers up until the emergence of women like O’Connor and Walker were men, resulted in an emergence of the stereotyped southern mother framed by the patriarchal perception and structure of southern women. Nagueyalti and Wolff continue, “Stereotypes of the mother usually derive from the image of the chaste woman, a modern-day vestige of the virgin archetype, the incarnation of loving-kindness, nurturing, and passivity” (2). Though the stereotype of the pure, caring, southern woman has been present throughout American southern history, Nagueyalti and Wolff claim that some contemporary writers are beginning to investigate and explore the missing complexities in relation to motherhood in the South (2). Like southern literature, southern culture and its representation in popular culture has too been a perpetuator of the southern mother stereotype- particularly in the representation in film; however, in order to
understand the presentation of southern motherhood in film, it must first be understood what types of films *Steel Magnolias, Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, and *Secret Life of Bees* actually are and why these types of films are situated in the South rather than any other region in American.

Though each one of the films this thesis focuses on can be placed in sub-categories (the maternal melodrama, the friendship film, the race relation film), they all three fall under a much broader category affectionately known as the chick flick. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, authors of *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, define and expound upon the chick flick genre and its role in women’s film. They define chick flicks as “commercial films that appeal to a female audience” (2). There is a tendency to want to include romantic comedies such as *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) or *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002) in the chick flick genre. However, romantic comedies tend to focus on romance itself, while chick flicks tend to be more focused on women and their own identities (Barker 93). Though chick flicks are frequently cast aside by film scholars and theorists, the examination of these movies in “chick culture” are necessary and important because of the messages and portrayals of women in contemporary culture (Ferriss and Young 2). Ferriss and Young argue:

Unquestionably film plays a significant role in framing and reflecting women’s place- their prescribed social and sexual roles, the role of female friendship and camaraderie- and play out the difficulties of negotiating expectations and achieving independence. They do so, however, in complex and often contradictory ways. Chick flicks illustrate, reflect, and present all of the cultural characteristics associated with the chick postfeminist aesthetic: a return to femininity, the primacy of romantic attachments, girlpower, a focus on female
pleasure and pleasures, and the value of consumer culture and girlie goods, including designer clothes, expensive and impractical footwear, and trendy accessories. (*Chick Flicks* 4)

The examination and critical analysis of chick flicks allows for a scholarly investigation into exactly how women are being reflected in mainstream American culture and what these portrayals say about American culture as a whole.

Though chick flics frequently take place in middle-America or metropolitan Britain, there is an entire subset of the chick flic which focuses specifically on a definable and identifiable region, particularly the American South (Ferriss and Young, *Chick Flicks* 19). The location of the South for certain chick flics is neither irrelevant nor accidental, but rather a specific choice on the part of the filmmakers and screenwriters. Roger Ebert sarcastically acknowledges this phenomenon in his review of *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* by suggesting that these films must take place in the South rather than Minnesota because “if you have to deal with the winter it makes you too realistic to become such a silly goose” (Ebert 159). While Ebert’s mock reason for the southern setting is clearly not meant to be taken seriously, he is right in suggesting that there must be a reason for this choice.

Deborah Barker argues this point in her essay “The southern-fried chick flic: Postfeminism goes to the movies.” Barker claims that the relationship between the South and chick flics stems from the evolution of feminism and the South’s lack of a deep association with the women’s movement (*Chick Flicks* 93). The feminist movement functioned under the belief that the personal *is* political. There was “reliance on political action, political movements, and political solutions,” (Ferriss and Young, *Chick Flicks* 3-4), and a resisting and questioning of the feminine (Ferriss and Young, *Chick Flicks* 3-4). However, postfeminism looked at the personal
as political. Postfeminism replaced agenda with attitude and embraced femininity and sexuality (Young and Ferriss, Chic Flicks 4). Barker notes:

The chick flick is responding simultaneously to feminist principles and to the backlash mentality, and that southern setting facilitates the sleight of hand necessary to negotiate this contradictory impulse. The southern locale helped to establish the genre as a whole, and especially its emphasis on the lives of white women, because while the cinematic South has often been the setting for dealing with issues of racial discrimination and the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement, it has not been associated with the women’s movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s, and 2) the cinematic South simultaneously links the southern chick flick to the tradition of- and nostalgia for- the white southern lady (the antithesis of the villainous, feminist career woman of the 1980s films). (93)

Barker goes on to argue that the South ultimately functions as a setting free of “political problems or solutions associated with feminism” (93) while simultaneously representing a “place where traditional feminine values still reign” (93). Essentially, the South’s ability to represent pre-feminism ideals allows for the postfeminism mentality of the 1980s and 1990s (a time when many of the southern-chick flicks were being made) to be shown without having to address the feminist movement so prevalent in films taking place in other regions of America.

Many southern chick flicks deal with the mother-daughter relationship and the “emphas[i]s [on] either groups or pairs of women who share center stage” (Barker 93). Barker continues to explain the presence of the mother-daughter dichotomy. She suggests:

The generational divide between feminists and postfeminists is seen within the chick flick in the form of the mothers and daughters who confront each other as
sexually mature women...The appeal of the mother-daughter pair is that it simultaneously speaks to very different audiences and age groups...the female audience for the chick flick is made up of both women who lived through the women’s movement and their daughters. The chick flick is therefore able to capitalize on the generational divide and appeal to both feminists and postfeminists, both mothers and daughters. (Barker 96)

The appeal of the mother-daughter relationship in order to work through the feminist and postfeminist issues is logical, but the women, especially the mothers, tend to fall into specific categories. E. Ann Kaplan persists, “The Mother, when not absent, is confined to the polarized paradigms of the saintly, all-nurturing, self-sacrificing ‘Angel in the House’ or the cruel Mother type who is sadistic and jealous” (116). All three of these categorizations are seen in the three films this thesis explores.

As Barker mentions, the southern chick flick also deals with the inclusion of female friendship. In her book, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*, Karen Hollinger maintains that female friendship and therapy are related. She writes, “Fictional female friends adopt roles similar to those of analyst and patient. By trying to know and understand her female friend, a woman comes to know herself” (15). Female friendship films can be seen in films ranging from *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Nine to Five* (1980) to *Sex and the City* (2008) and *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005). Though some critics maintain that female friendship films do little more than “confine them [women] entirely to the domestic sphere” (Hollinger 44), others suggest that these types of texts provide a “space of gender comfort, and idealizes source[s] of solace and support” (Boyd 169).
The three films this thesis focuses on combine the female friendship film with the mother-daughter relationship in maternal melodramas. All three films center around a mother and daughter who are surrounded by the mother’s friends. The women all interact together, ultimately creating a close, unbreakable bond. The outcome of this combination results in the formation of a new type of film: the mother-as-a-group film. Each film ultimately modernizes and complicates the forms of motherhood traditionally shown. By doing so, the three films suggest that there is a possible movement towards portraying motherhood in other ways than as either absent, angelic, or sadistic (Kaplan 116).
THE MATERNAL MELODRAMA AND **STEEL MAGNOLIAS**

The film *Steel Magnolias* (1989), adapted from Robert Harling’s play by the same name, depicts the perceived importance of southern motherhood and maternalism. The pursuit of motherhood and gender role fulfillment are not deterred by anything, even the possibility of death. The decision whether or not to have a baby is simply not up for debate. While it is obviously a woman’s right to decide whether or not to reproduce, *Steel Magnolias* shows how that decision can ultimately decide a woman’s worth. The film follows Shelby (Julia Roberts), her mother M’Lynn (Sally Fields), and her mother’s friends. Though the text spends time developing each one of the female characters’ lives, the main focus of the film appears to be Shelby’s desire to have a child and the struggle between her mother and her over Shelby’s decision.

The film details the relationship between M’Lynn and Shelby, framed by the incorporation of M’Lynn’s friends. M’Lynn’s friends consist of Truvy (Dolly Parton), the comedic owner of the local beauty parlor, Ouiser (Shirley MacLaine), the begrudging and wealthy divorcé, Annelle (Daryl Hannah), the quite, young, mysterious newcomer working at Truvy’s, and Clairee (Olympia Dukakis), the rich, ambitious widow. Beginning with Shelby’s wedding to Jackson (Dylan McDermott), “a good ole’ southern boy with good ole’ southern values” (*Steel Magnolias*), the film chronicles the events that take place within the first two years of her marriage. Shortly after her wedding, Shelby becomes pregnant. Despite suffering from diabetes and receiving advice from doctors and M’Lynn discouraging pregnancy, she eagerly embraces the possibility of motherhood regardless of the potential complications. After her son’s first birthday, Shelby and M’Lynn reveal to the women that Shelby’s kidneys are failing, and M’Lynn will donate a kidney to her daughter. Several months after the seemingly

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1 All citations and quotations hereafter included are taken from Ross’ film *Steel Magnolias*. 
successful transplant, Shelby slips into a coma. Eventually, M'Lynn and her family are forced to remove Shelby from life support. The film ends with M’Lynn burying her daughter and seemingly assisting to raise her grandson.

*Steel Magnolias*’ dialogue and storyline ultimately galvanizes the stereotyped image of southern women and more specifically southern mothers and the mother-daughter relationship made iconic by films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939). The mother-daughter relationship is one that is seen as turbulent and all consuming. Traditionally, it appears that each woman focuses only on appearance, possesses the hyper-femininity that is so often associated with southern belles, and is overwhelmingly concerned with becoming a mother and fulfilling their roles as wife and mother. In *Southern Mothers: Fact and Fiction in Southern Women’s Writing*, Nagueyalti Warren and Sally Wolff define southern mothers as “women who are prone to live entirely in the lives of their children, giving themselves over to the domestic life, and glorifying in subordination of self” (2). Warren and Wolff’s description of southern motherhood can be applied to both M’Lynn and Shelby. Each “live[s] entirely in the lives of their children” (Warren and Wolff 2). Despite this seemingly stereotypical portrayal of motherhood, Herbert Ross, the director, along with Robert Harling, flirt with the notion that southern maternalism is more complex, with multiple women helping one another in the maternal role. However, the group dynamic and the camaraderie they share suggests that motherhood in the south is more than the ideal woman being the ideal mother. This slightly more modern vision of women in the South may be ultimately overshadowed by the characters’ other, more expected actions and characteristics, and Shelby’s eventual self-sacrifice for the ability to have a child, but it is a fairly radical take on a traditional representation and lays the ground work for future films in the same category.
The Southern Belle and Lady

Like *Gone with the Wind*, *Steel Magnolias* portrays the southern lady and the southern belle. M’Lynn, like Ellen O’Hara, reins queen over her household. Tara McPherson, author of *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, suggests M’Lynn and Shelby’s “characterizations subtly draw on the mythologies of the plantation mistress” (163). Even while working at a mental health center, M’Lynn takes care of her large family. M’Lynn’s job, both in the workplace and at home, is to take care of people and keep things organized. Her ability to manage her obligations and the ease at which she accomplishes them and the seeming pleasure she gets from being in control places M’Lynn in the position as a modern-day plantation mistress (McPherson 163). Just as M’Lynn is a modern day representation of Ellen O’Hara, Shelby takes on the iconic role of Scarlett. Shelby continually rebels against her mother through small, seemingly insignificant actions. However, like Scarlett who eventually must take care of her family, placing her in a radical role as a southern belle, Shelby too works. It is this insistence on working outside the home that creates a major rift between mother and daughter. It is her continuous insistence on going against her mother’s wishes that occasionally make Shelby appear as a spoiled brat, reminiscent of Scarlett. It is not until she takes on a role of a mother that she grows out of her childish ways.

Like Ellen and Scarlett O’Hara, M’Lynn and Shelby embody the southern lady and southern belle through their devotion to family and their desire to keep up the feminine appearance associated with the myth. McPherson explains, “The belle and the lady are more ideology than reality (even if most white southerners will still claim to know a lady or two), but they are ideologies with real effects” (152). She continues:
[These] constructions of femininity impacted (and continue to impact) women’s lives throughout the country, not only in the South, but the regional fixation on, and deployment of, a particular feminine ideal reaches a different level in the South... Both the iconic image of the southern lady (certainly a more enduring symbol of womanhood than those associated with other regions) and the emphasis on a highly mannered performance of gender distinguish Dixie’s take on femininity. The performative nature of the lady signals a difference both in kind and of degree, limning a very different history of race, gender, and place than that of other regions. (McPherson 152)

It is exactly this “southern femininity” that sets up the women in *Steel Magnolias* as versions of the southern lady.

Ross and Harling present the women in the film as vain and obsessed with their physical appearance. Although in American culture women are often assumed to be concerned and focused on their appearance, the topic of outer beauty is continually addressed throughout the film. The women in the film are expected to raise the children, have a career, maintain the balance of the household, all while looking like they just walked off the stage at a beauty pageant. In addition, these women are expected to appear as though this beauty is natural, that they effortlessly wake up wearing lipstick and perfectly curled hair. By projecting the image of these “naturally” beautiful women who are able to do it all while still looking gorgeous, *Steel Magnolias* is continually reinforcing the conception of southern mothers and southern women as overly and outrageously concerned with their image and the perception that others have of them.

In her book *What Southern Women Know (That Every Woman Should)*, Ronda Rich writes about how to get “everything you want in life, love, and work” (cover). As a “born and
bred Steel Magnolia,” Rich dispenses advice on how to be a southern lady that up until now, according to Rich, had been kept secret (cover). At the root of many of her “secrets” lies the overwhelming importance of looking beautiful while doing anything and everything. She writes:

The South does have its share of failures˗ those distasteful women who bring shame to the dignity of our proud honor. Lazy, that’s what we call them. They are the women who spend their days popping bonbons…And-horror of horrors-wearing not even one stitch of makeup even though they’ll only be seen that day by the family cat, not to mention one dissatisfied husband. We’re talking not even a tint of pink on their colorless lips. (Rich 15)

While slightly ridiculous, this utter disgust for women who fail to meet the expectations of beauty illustrates how important the physical is for a southern lady. This same mentality and social responsibility is seen in the women in Steel Magnolias. Every woman in the film, even the most seemingly masculine of the women, Ouiser, takes a heavy interest in the appearance of themselves and others in their community.

The fact that a majority of the film takes place in a salon owned by Truvy further emphasizes the importance placed on physical appearance. Truvy’s Salon serves as the backdrop for a majority of the more telling and revealing scenes in the film. This location functions on two important levels. It further suggests the heavy importance of beauty and the exterior in the southern culture, ultimately propagating the belief that women, southern women in particular, gather in groups to do their hair, their make-up, and gossip about neighbors behind their backs. Though much of the conversation occurring in Truvy’s Salon can be seen as trivial, conversations about track lighting and Anne Boleyn, which is what one might expect from a group of women in salon, the encounters and conversations that take place in Truvy’s begin to
lay the groundwork for the depiction of the relationships between southern women as arguably one of the most important kinds of relationships in their lives. It is in this way that Truvy’s Salon functions as a type of sanctuary for the women in the film, a safe haven to “let their hair down,” and drop the façade they are so frequently required to uphold.

Like the femininity that derives from such a feminine setting as a beauty salon, even something in Shelby’s genetic makeup suggests she embodies the hyper-feminine persona that is so frequently associated with southern women. Shelby suffers from diabetes. Diabetes is a disease ultimately meaning that the affected party has too much sugar in the blood. Since southern women are often described as being sugary-sweet, it is important to note that Shelby is suffering from a disease which causes her to literally be so full of sugar that it is hurting her body, a point Tara McPherson mentions in *Reconstructing Dixie*. She explains, “Diabetes leads to the buildup of excess sugar in the blood, suggesting that the excessive sweetness that southern women endlessly perform has infected their very interiority” (161). Shelby is so feminine and so sweet and so southern, her body physically cannot handle it.

While the hyper-femininity may be deemed “an infection,” there is pressure in southern society to live up to the ideological expectations of the southern belle and lady. This need to be beautiful in the eyes of others adds to the belief that southern women and mothers project an overly exaggerated air of femininity and constructed womanliness. They are often imaged as hyper-feminine, exuding every genderized characteristic a woman is believed to have. This feminization is historically related to the South. *Reconstructing Dixie* suggests that this southern feminizing stems from the Civil War and the figurative feminizing of the South by the North. This feminizing defeat resulted in the South taking on the “hyperfeminized figure of the southern woman as [a] discursive symbol for the region” (McPherson 19). While all the women in the
film represent this cultural idea, it is Shelby that truly epitomizes the role of southern female. Early on in the film, the viewer is allowed to enter Shelby’s bedroom. The room is covered floor to ceiling in pink. The walls, the bedspread, the pillows, and rug are all varying shades of pink. Her room looks more like that of a little girl’s than of a woman about to be married. Her obsession with pink continues into her wedding. Her wedding colors, “blush and bashful,” are little more than two more slightly different shades of pink. As M’Lynn remarks, “The whole thing looks like it’s been drenched in Pepto-Bismol.” Shelby’s apparent obsession with the color pink, which is so frequently used in our culture to signify “girl,” creates the perception that Shelby is an ultra-feminized woman.

In addition to Shelby’s wedding colors of choice, her wedding itself resembles something a little girl would create for a pretend ceremony. Shelby’s hair is large and curly, causing her to radiate femaleness. The ceremony takes place in a traditional looking church. There is a pink carpet leading up to the altar. All nine of Shelby’s bridesmaids are covered head to toe in pink. Each one also dons big, curly hair. Directly behind the altar are pink curtains framing hundreds and hundreds of pink flowers. Each pew is decorated with pink ribbons and pink flowers. Shelby’s wedding dress is made from bright white satin and covered in lace and tulle. It has a long, cathedral style train and bulbous, ruffled shoulders. Her entire wedding ceremony is so categorically feminine and infantile; it is borderline comical. Even her reception projects what a little girl might imagine femininity is. The reception takes place at her parents’ plantation-style home. The theme of pink continues. The only hint of masculinity in the entire wedding, both ceremony and reception, is the groom’s cake which is a red-velvet cake made to look like an armadillo.
Though the women in the film are expected by those in their community of Chinquapin, Louisiana to present an appearance of effortless beauty, in Truvy’s Salon the viewer is shown some of the time-consuming, often painful experiences a southern woman must go through to protect her reputation. As Truvy states, “Honey, there’s no such thing as natural beauty.” This access to the world of southern women, and the effort it takes to look effortless, is one that is secretive and private. Only other women who are close, personal friends are permitted to witness the time and energy that goes into creating the look of a true Southern Lady. As Ouiser sits in the beautician’s chair, Annelle waxes her upper lip. This act of beautification is one that must be done, but it is one that must go unspoken between other women and undiscovered by their men. The men are kept away from the products and processes that construct a southern woman. Even Truvy’s husband, Spud, who lives in the same building as Truvy’s salon finds the tools used foreign and perplexing. While preparing for Shelby’s funeral, Spud sits in a chair while talking with Truvy. He begins fiddling with an applicator in a container of hot wax. Interrupting the serious conversation surrounding death and the importance of family, Spud interjects, “What the hell is this for?” Truvy responds, “It makes you beautiful.” Spud gives an expression of confusion and disgust before throwing the applicator back on the counter. Spud’s apparent revulsion stems from being allowed a glimpse into the world of southern women and their beauty secrets. It is clear that he does not wish to know the inner workings of his wife, or any other women. Southern men, like Spud, want only to see the finished product.

Though men in the south do not necessarily understand the process required to make a southern lady, the women understand it and enforce it. The inability to maintain the accepted expectations of what a woman in the south should and should not do to her appearance is brought up throughout the film. If women in the community are not maintaining their appearance, it
becomes a topic of conversation and borderline vicious gossip, particularly among the women. At Shelby’s wedding reception, Clairee and Truvy discuss the attire worn by a local woman. The camera cuts to a rather large, overweight woman dancing and gyrating her hips with a much younger man. She is in a dress that is very tight and accentuates her robust rear end. Clairee points out the absurdness of the woman’s outfit, and suggest that she must have “forgotten” her pantyhose. Truvy remarks, “I haven’t left the house without lycra on since I was 14.” In response, Clairee quips, “That is because you were brought up right.” This seemingly insignificant moment of intended comic relief further enforces the social and cultural belief that southern women must abide by certain standards when it comes to their appearance, for if they fail to act the part of “southern lady” successfully, their upbringing and familial background will be questioned; however, it is interesting to note that the women are often the individuals perpetuating this necessity.

Even in times of severe distress and turmoil, the women in this southern community are assumed to continue to be poised, beautiful beings. After Shelby’s funeral and M’Lynn’s unprecedented outburst of emotion, M’Lynn quickly becomes aware of her surroundings and the presence of others, even if the others are her close female friends. Immediately after her cathartic release, both emotionally and physically, she asks the group of women for a mirror. Her realization that she may have ruined her make-up by crying takes priority over everything else. Nothing, including the passing of her own daughter, is as important at that moment as her physical appearance to the outside world. The other women’s initial reply to M’Lynn’s eruption is to comment on how great she looks. They genuinely believe that reassuring M’Lynn about her appearance will in some way console her at her daughter’s funeral. Her friends’ response to her
outburst and M'Lynn’s subsequent request for a mirror further proves the weight placed on the physical in southern culture.

The Southern Mama’s Sacrifice

Arguably one of the most feminine, important traits a southern woman can possess is the ability to reproduce. Motherhood is so heavily stressed in southern culture that the act of having a child or multiple children can frequently define the woman’s womanliness. It is even more favorable for these women to produce male offspring, to further carry on the bloodline and namesake of the father of the child. In *Steel Magnolias*, this importance of being able to bear a child is brought to the forefront of the story. With Shelby’s potential inability to have children and the probable complications she will experience if she is actually able to conceive, the southern culture’s view on the significance of motherhood being directly related to the worth of the woman can be seen.

The topic of becoming a mother, or not being able to become one, is presented within the first ten minutes of the film. After sneaking into Shelby’s bedroom, Jackson, Shelby’s fiancé, begins to jokingly question Shelby about whether she still intends to marry him. Shelby responds, “If my daddy catches you in here the question of whether or not I can carry your children will not make a difference.” This simple response on Shelby’s part can be seen to exemplify a huge portion of the film. The issue is not discussed further between Shelby and Jackson during the remainder of the film, implying that the possibility of not having children between a married couple in the south is not even up for debate. The production of children is expected after a marriage.

Though Shelby and Jackson do not appear to discuss the possibility of not having children again, the topic is discussed ad nauseum between the other women in the film. Shelby
and her mother first reveal her potential infertility while preparing for Shelby’s wedding at Truvy’s. Shelby admits to the women that the night before, she had told Jackson she would not marry him because she could not give him children. M’Lynn interjects, “The doctor told her at the last appointment children aren’t possible.” As Shelby recounts the fight that ensued between Jackson and her, she begins to become visibly distraught. Shelby ultimately begins to suffer a diabetic attack that frightens some of the other women. It is obvious that Shelby is concerned about marrying Jackson because she is taking away his chance to have children. This stress is causing her body to literally break down. Shelby truly believes that her inability to reproduce makes her an unsuitable bride, especially to a southern family where the ability to procreate and have a large family is seen as a value.

Against the doctors’ advice, Shelby and Jackson choose to have a child and successfully conceive. Shelby is willing to risk her life to both fulfill her duty as a southern woman and fulfill her role as a southern wife. She tells her mother, “I want a child of my own. I think it would help things a lot.” This confession on Shelby’s part implies that there is trouble in her marriage, probably stemming from their inability to reproduce. Shelby continues, “The one thing that would make me happy is to have this baby…Having this baby is the opportunity of a lifetime. When everything’s said and done there will be a little piece of immortality…Jackson’s happy, he wants a son. It’s all he can talk about.” M’Lynn responds, “I guess since he doesn’t have to carry it, it’s really none of his concern.” M’Lynn’s recognition of the fact that the risk lies only with the mother, further perpetuates the implication of maternal sacrifice. Without fully comprehending the potential consequences of becoming a mother, Shelby rationalizes her decision. Shelby’s reasons for having this child epitomize the southern cultural beliefs. She must have a child to save her marriage and appease her husband. She must have a son to carry on the
father’s bloodline and namesake. The men ultimately want immortality, want to have a physical embodiment of their masculinity, and it is the southern woman’s responsibility to make that a reality. Nothing, not even the well being of the mother, is as important as reproducing a son.

The presence of motherhood and birth is seen throughout the film. In addition to Shelby’s struggle with becoming a mother, there are small hints and implications towards the importance of it in the southern culture. There are two holidays associated with birth in the film that play significant roles in the film. Both Easter and Christmas take on character like positions. Easter is seen in the beginning and end of the film, while Christmas is visible during the middle. Both of these holidays are Christian holidays dealing with birth and rebirth. It is significant to mention that Shelby announces her pregnancy and intentions to have a child on Christmas, the day celebrated in Christianity as the birth of Jesus. The connection between Christmas and the birth of Jesus and Shelby’s own future birth suggests that Shelby is obligated, as a southern woman, to have this child. She is fulfilling her destiny. Easter also plays a heavy role in the film as a Christian holiday. Easter is set as a backdrop in the beginning of the film when Shelby and Jackson are preparing to be married. This suggests a link between Jesus’ sacrifice at the Passover meal and Shelby’s eventual sacrifice for her unborn son. It also emerges at the end of the film when Anelle begins to go into labor. Both of these portrayals of Easter and the subsequent events that occur during them are an example of new beginnings; however, the presence of Easter in situations that show women either preparing to have children through marriage or actually going into labor suggests that motherhood can be seen as a rebirth. Having a child allows the woman to fulfill her obligation and be “reborn” as a mother.
The film’s depiction of maternal sacrifice and the lack of concern for one’s self in the quest for children essentially reinforce the woman’s role as mother at all costs. In her text, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*, Karen Hollinger argues:

The film [Steel Magnolias] identifies motherhood so strongly with suffering and self-sacrifice that at its conclusion it can fully support the social validation of motherhood at any cost to the mother… It never questions Shelby’s decision because it never questions woman’s traditional social roles under patriarchy; instead, it celebrates these roles as natural and positive even if a woman must kill herself to fit into them. It glorifies women’s suffering and self-sacrifice in the service of the female procreative role. (80)

Shelby’s death in the quest to fit her gender role is only questioned by M’Lynn, and only until Shelby’s son is born. The failure of anyone in the film to really analyze or doubt Shelby’s decision produces a failure on the film’s part to question maternal roles in the South.

**Female Friendship in Southern Society**

While *Steel Magnolias* does take on many traits, storylines, and characteristics expected in southern culture, *Steel Magnolias* begins to look at the mother-daughter relationship, the role of a mother, and the relationships between women in a way that other texts dealing with the South do not. Yes, the women in the film are ultra-feminine, undeniably concerned with their appearance, and desperate to fulfill their female obligation to be a devoted wife and mother; however, the way the women in the film interact with each other shows that there is potentially much more to these southern belles than popular culture has given them credit for. Even the name of the film itself, *Steel Magnolias*, implies that there is more depth and strength to these southern women than many expect.
In fact, it is this expected representation of southern women in *Steel Magnolias*, that allows for the ultimate complexity the film creates. The film is intended to reach the chick flick audience consisting of women of all ages, and from all backgrounds. In essence, chick flick are attempting to reach the average woman. Therefore, it is important to meet audience expectations, even if that means giving into stereotypical characters. However, at the same time, depicting women like Shelby and M’Lynn as the expected southern Ladies further highlights the modernity of the things they discuss, the jobs they hold, and the friendships and camaraderie they share. By incorporating the Old South expectations of the audience with the emerging progressiveness of the New South, each version works together to draw attention to the other.

Unlike films like *Gone with the Wind* where much of the film is occupied with heterosexual romantic relationships, the focus of *Steel Magnolias* is on the women and their relationships with one another. There is little importance placed on romantic relationships at all. In fact, the men in the film are little more than one-dimensional punch lines. The relationship between mother and daughter, female friend and female friend, and female friend and daughter paint a new picture and highlight a new way of looking at what it means to be a mother in the south. It is this unique look at women living below the Mason-Dixon line that gives *Steel Magnolias* a contemporary edge over other films in the same genre.

Some scholars such as Karen Hollinger suggest that the friendship component in *Steel Magnolias* is little more than another way to perpetuate female gender roles. Hollinger suggests:

> Because motherhood is presented as women’s true source of fulfillment, female friendship is granted importance only as a way for women to find the support they need to fulfill their maternal roles. One might call *Steel Magnolias* a maternal melodrama masquerading as a female friendship film. It uses friendship among
women merely as support for what it presents as women’s ‘natural’ maternal role.

(79-80)

However, while the majority of the issues that the women discuss with each other are seen as related to motherhood, disregarding the undeniably close relationships between the women is ultimately ignoring a large portion of the film. The women in the film rely on each other for support, advice, and constructive criticism. This is something that is fairly radical in southern culture. In her conduct manual, Rich explores this Southern phenomenon of privacy and image management. She suggests there are only three people in a southern woman’s life who function as appropriate confidantes:

Southern women, like all women, are sensitive and emotional. We, too, feel the need to share the secrets of our souls. But we have found ways to do that other than unburdening ourselves to friends over coffee. A Southern woman’s top choice for confidante is her mother...The second choice is a member of the clergy, therapist, or doctor... The best choice, however, is ourselves. (172-3)

Rich’s explanation of Southern female privacy and need to protect her image is a common perception that Steel Magnolias attempts to dissect and deconstruct. The women only share their problems with their friends and comrades, and share nothing with their families, with the exception of Shelby and M’Lynn’s relationship with one another.

Nothing is out of line or too personal for the women to discuss with each other. In the face of concern over Shelby’s pregnancy, M’Lynn turns to her friends. Drum, M’Lynn’s husband, fails to recognize the severity and potential dangers stemming from Shelby’s decision to conceive. It is only Ouiser who acknowledges that “this baby is not a good thing.” The other women then understand M’Lynn’s worries and concerns, but they ultimately lift her spirits and
put her at ease in a way that it seems apparent her own husband would never be able to do.
Similarly, after maintaining a calm, composed demeanor throughout Shelby’s coma, death, and funeral, it is only when she is safely in the company of her friends that M’Lynn allows her flood of emotions to erupt. This ease and comfort in the presence of her four closest friends is something that, at the time, was not frequently seen. As Ronda Rich explains, a Southern woman is supposed to keep her secrets to herself (172-3).

The depiction of Southern women more closely connected and bonded with their female friends slightly disrupts the common popular conception of Southern women and mothers. Unlike Gone with the Wind, where Scarlett, the daughter, is left to take care of the family, it is M’Lynn who survives her daughter and must take care of both her own family and Shelby’s. Without this role-reversal, Steel Magnolias could potentially be a simple reinscribing of the iconic Southern film. Though Steel Magnolias does exhibit several romanticized images of Southern life and Southern motherhood through the portrayal of motherhood as a sacrifice that is essential to a woman’s worth, the film suggests the potential importance of a group of women working together to support one another. Even in relation to the very personal level of raising a child and being a mother, something very frequently seen as an act others should not comment on or become involved in, Steel Magnolias and the women it focuses on flirt with the idea of portraying a more modernized image of mothering in the South.
THE ABSENT MOTHER IN *DIVINE SECRETS OF THE Y-YA SISTERHOOD*

A similar dynamic that populates *Steel Magnolias* can be seen in Callie Khouri’s filmic version of *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002). Adapted from Rebecca Wells’ novel by the same name, *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* also looks at a mother-daughter relationship in the South while simultaneously depicting the lives of several southern women and their friendships. Deborah Barker, author of “The Southern-fried Chick Flick” writes, “*Ya-Ya Sisterhood* proves that thirteen years after *Steel Magnolias* the basic elements of the southern chick flick are virtually unchanged. It clearly follows in the footsteps of its predecessors in its southern setting, uses of nostalgia, focus on the lives of the female character, emphasis on female empowerment through female bonding, and marginalization of the male characters” (107).

However, unlike *Steel Magnolias* where the friends of the mother are there to support the mother but do little to actually interfere with the raising of the child, *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* presents a group of women who take on the mother role and insert themselves into the mother-daughter relationship. Though the women in *Steel Magnolias* do help with parenting by lending advice and friendship to M’Lynn, which then ultimately influences her relationship with Shelby, *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* portrays women who function as a mother to the daughter when her own mother is absent, whether literally or figuratively. This portrayal of women helping to raise a daughter suggests the modernized idea of mothering as a group effort. In addition to introducing a new way of examining the group-as-mother relationship, *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* also displays a new form of religion which the women in the film practice. Instead of following traditional Christianity, which is so prevalent in *Steel Magnolias* and Southern culture in general, the women in *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* worship mother earth. Their religion functions on two levels: it further perpetuates the
importance of the maternal in one’s life, and it also begins to show a deviation from Southern stereotypes as Bible-thumpers in way that Steel Magnolias fails to.

Khourí’s film follows the life of Vivane “Vivi” Walker (Ellen Burstyn) and her relationship with her friends, the Ya-Yas, and her daughter Siddalee “Sidda” Walker (Sandra Bullock). Vivi and Sidda have a difficult relationship due to Vivi’s absenteeism, alcoholism, and abuse when Sidda was a child. The film begins in 1993 in New York City where Sidda is a famous playwright. After Sidda gives an interview for a magazine detailing her troubled childhood and abusive mother, Vivi refuses to acknowledge her daughter. The Ya-Yas, consisting of Caro (Maggie Smith), Teensy (Fionnula Flanagan), and Necie (Shirley Knight), take it upon themselves to fix the situation and reveal truths about Vivi which have been kept from Sidda for her whole life. After years of therapy and believing her mere presence in her mother’s life caused her mother to leave, the Ya-Yas reveal Vivi was actually forced to leave her children to receive help for a nervous breakdown. Ya-Ya Sisterhood looks across several time periods in the South and the lives of the women at the heart of the film. It ranges from taking place in the late 1930’s to the early 1990’s, with the past being represented through flashbacks. In this way the viewer is able to see how time and circumstance have shaped the women at the center of the plot, providing a more three-dimensional vision of Southern women than is frequently shown in other films like Steel Magnolias.

After Sidda’s revealing interview with Time Magazine, she and her mother partake in a humorous and hurtful back-and-forth war against one another. With Vivi cutting Sidda out of her will, and Sidda cutting Vivi out of her wedding, the feud culminates with the two women refusing to speak to one another. The Ya-Yas, unbeknownst to Vivi, fly to New York City to kidnap Sidda and return her to Louisiana where they slowly reveal secrets and truths regarding
Vivi’s life. This need to return Sidda to her home place in Louisiana is significant both in plot and cultural importance. Being back in Louisiana conjures memories and feelings long suppressed by Sidda. It also reinforces the frequent belief that Southerners have a strong connection with place and setting in a way that not all Americans exhibit. In *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, Tara McPherson expounds on this idea of “coming home” in relation to the south. She writes:

> In much of the discourse on and of the South, place (as region) and home come together in the notion of ‘home-place,’ a phrase indicating the degree to which the meaning of the South often slides into the meaning of home…Thus for many white southerners, ‘going home’ is more than a return to a physical space or a site of familial origin; it entails as well a sense of region and regional difference, of ways of feeling southern. (216)

Sidda’s “coming home” puts her in a better frame of mind to accept what the Ya-Yas have to explain. New York is seen as dark, covered in black, and modern. Sidda is only seen wearing black while in the city. There is little sunlight permeating her apartment, and the restaurant she and the Ya-Yas visit is loud and dimly lit. Conversely, Louisiana is seen as bright, colorful, calm, and serene. The house the Ya-Yas take Sidda to is old, wooden, and rustic. This sharp contrast between the two regions works to illustrate the perceived differences the North and the South, and the nostalgic and romantic notion that Sidda, and the United States as a nation, need to get back to our roots.

The Broken Mother-Daughter Relationship and the Rejection of Motherhood

Unlike the close relationship between mother and daughter in *Steel Magnolias*, Sidda and Vivi have an almost non-existent relationship. Though initially the reasons for their broken
maternal bond are unclear, as the film progresses the underlying reasons for the conflict between mother and daughter are revealed. Though there are frequently mother-daughter relationship portrayals with at least some turbulence, like Gone with the Wind, Steel Magnolias, and Fried Green Tomatoes, the completely shattered relationship like Sidda and Vivi’s is not necessarily as prevalent in films of the romanticized South; however, many southern female writers look at the difficulties associated with the southern mother-daughter relationship, such as Flannery O’Connor. Her own writings reflect her complicated and conflicted relationship with her mother. In her essay “Making Peace with the (M)other,” Barbara Bennett reflects on the conflicts in O’Connor’s writings and other, more contemporary, works. Bennett explains:

The significance of mothers and daughters in O’Connor’s work, though, is in her exploration of what happens to women who do not fit the traditional, submissive role dictated by the southern culture of her era…Remnants of O’Connor’s daughters can be seen in many contemporary works by southern women writers who create female characters who cannot survive and thrive under the oppressively restrictive southern values of their mothers. As a result, this conflict drives many fictional mothers and daughters apart. (187)

Though the main conflict between Sidda and Vivi may not be due to Sidda’s resistance to the southern culture of her mother, but rather to her mother’s absence, there is still some visible resentment towards her southern roots. Sidda says about her mother, “I’m sick to death of this whole center-of-the-universe-holier-than-thou-nothing-is-ever-good-enough-oh-how-I’ve-suffered-nobody-understands-me-somebody-fix-me-a-drink-and-hand-me-a-Nembutal-worn-out-
Scarlett-O’Hara-thing.” Her clear reference to the southern social scene she has grown up in sets the tone for her injured relationship with Vivi.

Although Bennett suggests that the conflict between southern mothers and daughters stems from different views and ideologies, she also claims that this rejection of the mother is necessary in order for the daughter to develop (188). However, it is ultimately Vivi’s breakdown which hinders the adult relationship, causing Sidda to push herself away. Without knowing her mother was actually sent away against her will, Sidda has spent “thousands of dollars on therapy” to figure out what she did to cause her mother to resent her. Sidda believes Vivi is actually jealous and resentful of her success in escaping the small-town South. Though not the reason given to Sidda, it is not farfetched to assume that some of the causes of Vivi’s breakdown may stem from her attempts to play the role of the small-town southern mother, ultimately causing Vivi to resent Sidda for forcing her to give up her dream.

In the flashbacks showing Sidda as a child, the viewer is allowed to witness Vivi’s gradual breakdown. Deborah Barker explains Vivi’s breakdown as a result of her circumstance as a woman in the South. She writes, “Vivi’s thwarted ambition, her sense of being overwhelmed by motherhood, and her absentee husband are the sources of her discontent. Furthermore, Vivi’s attempt to be a traditional woman, with the help of religion and prescription drugs, sends her over the edge and causes her to ‘drop her basket’ (Barker 108). This discontent with motherhood is seen when Vivi leaves her husband and children the first time. After slipping further into alcoholism herself, all four of Vivi’s children become sick. Dealing with her vomiting children, Vivi begins to crack. She leaves the children with their nanny and sneaks off to a hotel room where she sleeps for several days. However, her maternal instincts reemerge after calling Sidda

2 All citations hereafter included are taken from Khouri’s Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood
on the phone. Though the conversation is mundane, Vivi’s facial expressions change and she begins to cry. Her role as mother is greater than her desire to be free of responsibility.

Like fictional women before her who fail to embrace their maternal roles, such as Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontellier, Vivi feels conflicted in relation to her own domestic feelings and the feelings southern society suggests she should have. However, unlike Edna, Vivi is “cured” of her resentment and disinterest in motherhood, with her feelings being blamed on alcoholism. While this connection results in the perpetuation of the notion of the southern mother as born to breed, this reconciliation to the role of the mother is necessary in order to have a reunion between mother and daughter. Barbara Bennett argues that this reconciliation is necessary and the ultimate goal of southern female literature. She claims, “The most important step is the eventual reunion with the Mother- who is no longer the Other” (Bennett 188). Bennett goes on to write:

The thread that runs…through the majority of today’s southern novels by women is the reconciliation and acceptance of the old traditions with new choices, represented by the changing image of the southern mother. Coming to terms with the differences from and similarities to her mother is crucial before a daughter can move toward her adult potential. (199)

Though Sidda is arguably already in adulthood, she is incapable of agreeing to marry her fiancé and begin her own domestic life until she reconciles with her mother. The reconciliation may be a perpetuation of stereotypes, but it is important for the growth of the protagonist.

Meddling Women and Multiple Mothers

While the eventual embracing of motherhood and domesticity is a key trait in films depicting women, especially southern films, it is the involvement by outsiders in the relationship between mother and daughter that is unique in *Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. As mentioned in Ronda Rich’s
southern belle behavior manual, it is impolite and unseemly to burden others with your own troubles. She claims, “Southern women are very discreet about problems in our relationships and our lives. We may discuss other people’s problems, but we never discuss our own outside our families” (Rich 172). Similarly, it is unthinkable to interfere with someone else’s family or personal tribulations. While revealing to Sidda the actual cause of her mother’s disappearance in 1963, the Ya-Yas reflect on their involvement in raising and failure to help raise Sidda and her siblings. Though Caro is seen tending to the children immediately following Vivi’s breakdown and shown again assisting Shep (James Garner), Sidda’s father, with the children at an Easter celebration in the months after Vivi’s time at the mental institution, the women now realize they could have done more to soothe the children’s, particularly Sidda’s, confusion and unease resulting from the absence of their mother. Caro remarks, “Looking back I wish we would’ve talked to you kids more, but I guess it comes from some archaic notion that you don’t interfere with other people’s kids.” The realization that it would have been acceptable, even beneficial, to “interfere” with Vivi’s children regardless of social norms and taboos, acts as a social commentary on the societal expectations in Southern communities. Caro’s reference to the belief being “archaic” further calls to attention the South and the belief that many of its cultural rules are often stuck in a time-warp of sorts, and also that the South is changing. However, while pointing out that there are undeniable societal norms in Dixie, Caro’s insight into her maternal role suggests that these “archaic notions” may be changing, and a “New South” may be emerging.

The women obviously eventually get past their hesitation to interfere with someone else’s children by kidnapping Sidda and exposing the family secrets that have for so long been hidden amongst the Ya-Yas. Piece by piece the women allow Sidda into their lives and the life of her
mother. They begin with the conception of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood and culminate with the institutionalization of Vivi. In each instance the women and their lives are intertwined, creating the ultimate female bonding. In each event, from their experience at the Gone with the Wind premier as children, to the death of family members, to Vivi’s emotional abuse by her own mother, the women always look to each other for support. By illustrating the continuous involvement in each other’s lives, the film is setting up the acceptability of the women involving themselves so deeply in the relationship between a mother and daughter.

Though the practice of interfering with other people’s families may be frowned upon, Ya-Ya Sisterhood attempts to suggest that this involvement can be and is frequently beneficial to the familial relationship. With Vivi and Sidda refusing to speak to each other, the likelihood of the women reconciling their problems would probably have been low without the help of the Ya-Yas. For Sidda’s entire life she believed that her mother had left her and her siblings because Vivi was resentful of her role of mother and wife in the Southern culture. Sidda remarks, “She wanted a life bigger than she was gonna find being a cotton farmer’s wife with four kids.” Sidda’s understanding of her mother’s actions and subsequent disappearance affects the way she views her mother, herself, and her own future. She deeply believes that her mother simply did not want to be a mother or wife and that is why she left. Sidda carries guilt and responsibility for ruining her mother’s aspirations, which ultimately results in resentment on Sidda’s part. This resentment and distrust of the mother manifests itself in Sidda’s own fear of marriage and motherhood. She refuses to set a date for her wedding, which she eventually realizes stems from her own family life. The fighting and abuse between her mother and father results in her belief in marriage as a dysfunctional relationship. This in turn causes her to question her own ability to mother a child, acknowledging that her own experiences as a child and her mother’s inability to
be a present, loving maternal figure will potentially result in her children feeling the same way towards her as they grow up. Her fear of becoming her mother leads her to call off her wedding, which the women in the film view as “the biggest mistake of her life.”

Without the women intervening in Sidda and Vivi’s lives, the film suggests that the two women would remain miserable and bitter. It is only with the help of the Ya-Yas that the women are able to re-connect as mother and daughter and move on in their own lives towards better, happier existences. It is in this way that *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* presents the modernized notion of mother as a group dynamic. Not only does it simply portray a group of women helping to raise a daughter in the South, but it also suggests that this group dynamic is actually better for the mother and daughter. The Ya-Yas push Vivi to reveal the truth to her daughter (even though, with Vivi’s blessing, the Ya-Yas eventually have to tell Sidda the truth because Vivi is incapable of admitting it to her daughter’s face), ultimately releasing any feelings of guilt and resentment from Sidda. She realizes her mother’s disappearance was the result of alcoholism and bad advice from a doctor rather than her own existence. The two women ultimately are able to come to terms with one another and themselves thanks to the Ya-Yas meddling and involvement.

The film ends with the first visible interaction between modern-day Vivi and Sidda. The two women sit on the front porch swing and agree to have Sidda’s eventual wedding at her childhood home. Vivi apologizes for her inability to be a better mother, and acknowledges there are some things she does not expected to be forgiven for “by her children or God.” Deborah Barker refers to this as the “ultimate validation of the abused child…allow[ing] the daughter to revise yet participate in her mother’s traditions” (110).

In addition to the benefits such female relationships offer towards reconnecting Vivi and Sidda, the close female friendships suggest a stronger bond than nearly any other relationship
depicted in the film. According to Karen Hollinger, this female camaraderie is nothing new. She explains, “The most prominent form of nineteenth-century women, segregated from their husbands and male children by rigid gender-role differentiation, formed…a female world of love and ritual” (Hollinger 77). Hollinger further details sentimental female friendships:

Sentimental friendships are close, emotionally effusive, dyadic same-sex unions…Sentimental female friends cry and confide, protest and embrace, and relate so intensely that their friendship acquires many of the signs of a love affair. Although extreme and radical in its expression, sentimental female friendship is frequently quite limited in action. It is often portrayed as stimulating personal psychological growth, but it rarely leads to the promotion of significant social change. (7)

Though Hollinger’s explanation of what usually happens in a female sentimental friendship is highly visible in *Divine Secrets* through the exploration of emotions and confidantes, her analysis claiming these friendships are primarily used to work through issues in romantic relationships is not descriptive of the portrayal of female friendship in the film. Other than the two romantic relationship’s of Vivi’s life, which truly only occupy a small fraction of the film’s story, the romantic lives of the Ya-Yas are not discussed. Likewise, Hollinger’s suggestion that these friendships rarely lead to social change is also not entirely applicable to the Ya-Yas. While they do not necessarily create great social adjustments, their friendship itself seeks to break the long-standing social codes of silence in relation to southern culture.

**Surrogate Mothers and Maternal Religions**

*Divine Secret’s* introduction of close southern women actively participating in one another’s lives frames the women as potential surrogate mothers for Sidda while her own mother
is gone. This way of presenting motherhood as a group effort is not seen in previous films of the same genre. Though *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* eventually falls back into the Hollywood happy ending with Vivi embracing her role as mother and the need for multiple mothers being diminished, the mother-as-group dynamic is still more progressive than other films in a similar genre.

In addition to presenting the new idea of mothering as a group effort, the film also introduces the worship of a different religion from traditional Christianity. In *Steel Magnolias* the presence of Christianity is overtly shown and discussed. The families in the film go to church, celebrate Christmas and Easter, and participate in different church functions. Christianity can be seen as a patriarchal religion where God as seen as “the Father” who oversees all. In Christianity, it is the women who caused the downfall of Eden, and it is the women who are continually attempting to repent for their sins. The traits of sacrificial love, passivity, and humility are all associated with Christianity. However, the women in *Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, do not worship God and the conventional leaders of Christianity. The Ya-Yas invent their own form of religion which centers on the worship of Mother Earth and the Ya-Ya priestesses who came before them. It is this departure from the patriarchy of Christianity to the matriarchy of Mother Earth that suggests the feminist ideals of the Ya-Yas. It is significant that these women, who would have been in their late teens and early twenties during second wave feminism, are celebrating a female religious figure. While Christianity has frequently been associated with the patriarchal South, with terms such as the Bible Belt, the Ya-Yas worship of the maternal, both Mother Earth and priestesses, is a radical leap in the portrayal of religion in southern culture. This further argues that a “New South” is taking shape, while still making use of many of the characters and social cues the audience expects when viewing a southern locale.
Vivi initially introduces the other women to the religion as children. Though the exact origin of the religion is never explained, some of the background is detailed while Vivi inducts the other women into the faith. She explains:

These are the headdresses of the queens that have gone before us. They come from Indian holy ground... the jungles of the ancients... prairies of the Norwegians... and the forests of the mighty Amazons. The royal crowns of our people… This is the blood of our people, the wolf people, the alligator people, and the moon women from which we gain our strength to rule all worlds… We are the flames of the fires, the whirling of the winds. We are the waters of the rains and the rivers and the oceans. We are the rocks and the stones. And now by the power vested in me, I declare we are the mighty Ya-Ya priestesses. Let no man put us under. Now our blood flows through each other as it's done for all eternity. Loyal forever. We raise our voices in the words of Mumbo Gumbo...

YA-YA!

The importance of the religion stems from a connection with the Earth, connection with women from all regions, and the belief in female empowerment. The women do not worship a man, as many religions do, but rather they worship one of the ultimate mothers, Mother Earth. Their worship of the maternal further illuminates the importance of strong, motherly figures in a southern woman’s life.

This blatant rejection of the patriarchal leader of God further illustrates Deborah Barker’s explanation of why chick flicks frequently take place in the South. She writes:

The southern past in the chick flick evokes nostalgia for both the female solidarity celebrated in the feminist era and nostalgia for the pre-feminist era in which
Gloria Steinem’s ‘click’ has not yet been heard and when women’s dissatisfaction was still ‘the problem that has no name.’ In other words, the white southern chick flick is the perfect postfeminist film genre. It emerges in the gap between feminism and postfeminism, between second wave and third wave; at the same time it acts as a bridge to cross the gap. As such, the chick flick invokes the conflicts and contradictions of postfeminism. (93)

The rejection of the masculine, patriarchal constraints of the Christian religion are replaced with the maternal, feminine solidarity, creating an equality with the religious figures the women worship, rather than a patriarchal figure who will always be considered their superior.

The Ya-Yas pray to Mother Earth and their fellow Ya-Ya priestesses, though Vivi also prays to the other perfect mother, Mary. She prays, “Mary, mother of the motherless, can you see me?” The fact that Vivi refers to Mary as the “mother of the motherless” is significant because she becomes another surrogate mother in a film so populated with surrogacy and substitute maternalism. This further reflects the film’s suggestion of the importance and potential benefits of having multiple maternal figures, even if those mothers are religious figures who exist only in the mind or spirit. Both the idea of mothering as a group and worshiping of women in religious-like fashions is a unique, modernized portrayal of southern women, southern life, and southern mothers, ideas that will be explored and perpetuated in later films.

After Sidda is inducted into the Ya-Yas, she is no longer the “daughter,” ultimately releasing the fellow Ya-Yas as her surrogate mothers. However, because she is now a Ya-Ya herself, Mother Earth and Mary now function as her surrogate mothers who will always be there. In addition, she now has Vivi back as her actual birth mother. Sidda now has multiple mothers and multiple mothers turned peers. This presence of several maternal figures appears to be
beneficial to Sidda, as she now has achieved reconciliation with her mother, allowing for a happy domestic life of her own.
Like *Steel Magnolias* and *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, *The Secret Life of Bees* (Prince-Blythewood 2008) focuses on a Southern mother-daughter relationship and the importance of female friendship and bonding. However, unlike the other two films, *The Secret Life of Bees*, which takes place in South Carolina, tackles the additional issue of race relations in the South during the tumultuous time of the 1960’s. The inclusion of the racial element in this film adds a new layer of complexity to the already fraught mother-daughter relationship issue, and further emphasizes the role of the group as mother. The film portrays the archetypal mammy figure as a substitute-mother of sorts, occasionally reinforcing the antebellum stereotype that black women actually enjoy taking care of white children. Though the film often takes the position of so many other films that portray the mammy character, such as *Gone with the Wind* and even *Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, Prince-Blythewood’s take on Sue Monk-Kidd’s novel attempts to construct a new image of what it means to be a caregiver, what it means to be a mother, and how being an African-American woman influences both of these topics.

In *Secret Life of Bees*, Lily Owens (Dakota Fanning) is a fourteen year old girl living in South Carolina in the 1960s with her abusive and absent father, T. Ray (Paul Bettany), and her father’s black employee, Rosaleen (Jennifer Hudson). When Lily was three, she accidently shot her mother, Deborah (Hilarie Burton), while her mother was attempting to leave T. Ray. Knowing very little about her mother, Lily decides to search for information about her. She decides to visit Tuburon, South Carolina because it is the name on the back of her mother’s wooden carving of the Black Madonna, bringing Rosaleen along with her. Lily and Rosaleen eventually end up at the Boatwright house, a bright pink home occupied by three black sisters, August Boatwright (Queen Latifah), and her sisters, June (Alicia Keys) and May (Sophie
Okonedo), allow Lily and Rosaleen into their home. The women are all independent, intelligent black women who own a honey company. It is eventually realized that Lily’s mother lived with the Boatwrights prior to her death, and August was Deborah’s nanny when she was a child. T. Ray eventually arrives at the Boatwrights’ to reclaim his daughter, only to be turned away. The women embrace Lily and Rosaleen, allowing Rosaleen to be a person rather than property, and giving Lily the mother figures she has always longed for.

The mammy figure is one that has survived in Southern antebellum history. She is seen everywhere from films to syrup bottles. In her book *Clinging to Mammy*, Micki McElya discusses the presence and persona of the mammy in popular narratives and popular culture. She writes, “When black women’s work was appropriated by the white household, their care-giving labor was reframed as motherly instinct and love in the figure of the mammy, thus not as work at all…The black mammy figure became a powerful icon of motherly affection and care” (82). Nagueyalti Warren and Sally Wolff explain the relationship between southern belle and “other mother.” Warren and Wolff suggest, “The southern ideal was the belle, and the lady-mother. The black woman and others of similarly lowly status were the other mothers- the caregivers within the plantation household as well as within their own cabins. To the exclusion of their own needs and well being, they provided for others, as the proverbial breasts were sucked dry” (5).

The mammy has specific characteristics that are frequently exhibited in fiction. She is portrayed as:

- self-respecting, independent, loyal, forward, gentle, captious, affectionate, true, strong, just, warm-hearted, compassionate-hearted, fearless, popular, brave, good, pious, quick-witted, capable, thrifty, proud, regal, courageous, superior, skillful, tender, queenly, dignified, neat, quick, tender, competent, possessed with a
temper, trustworthy, faithful, patient, tyrannical, sensible, discreet, efficient, careful, harsh, devoted, truthful. (Hall 69-70)

She is charged with raising a white woman’s child; however, so often the mammy is shown as embracing her role as surrogate mother because, while she is black, she is also a woman. This belief ultimately reinforces the idea that motherhood and the desire to mother is inherent in females. It is this belief, that these slave women sentenced to take care of white women’s children actually enjoy what they are doing because it is natural to them, which populates the imagined and romanticized South.

This portrayal of mammy can be seen in films such as The Birth of a Nation (1915), Gone with the Wind (1939), The Color Purple (1985), Fried Green Tomatoes (1991). The mammy is constructed as a large, asexual, unfeminine, and “shining black, pure African” (McPherson 52). Similarly, August Boatwright, the mammy character in The Secret Life of Bees, falls into the same physical category as her predecessors. August is large, both in height and weight, towering over her counterparts in the film. When standing next to tiny Lily she looks remarkably enormous. August wears her hair in a bun, never down. Her clothing consists mainly of khaki pants and a white button up shirt when she is tending to the bees, and a plain, basic dress when at home. All of her clothing accentuates her shapelessness and paints her as unfeminine as possible, without crossing over into a masculine portrayal. August is neither feminine nor masculine; she is nothing.

In addition to her physical attributes, August is seen to take on the role of mammy with open arms. When Lily shows up, it is August alone who embraces the young, white, female visitor and her current caretaker Rosaleen. Knowing they are in trouble, August still allows them into her home with all the sweetness and charm of a Southern woman. When June questions her
sister’s actions, August replies, “I need to do this, all right.”³ This sense of obligation August feels to take care of the young, white girl further puts August in the role of a black slave. Instead of August saying, “I want to do this,” which would suggest that she is acting purely on humanity or maternal instincts, her insistence that she “need[s] to do this” elicits the feeling that she still thinks of herself as a nanny to white children. August’s initial welcoming of Lily and Rosaleen continues throughout the film, slowly increasing her influence and maternal position in Lily’s life. August teaches Lily how to be a bee keeper. When Lily falls ill, it is August who takes care of her, taking her to her own bedroom as a mother often does when her child is sick. She provides her with advice on boys, having crushes, and doing her hair, all of which are traits and actions typically associated with a maternal figure. Though the film eventual works towards creating a more complex vision of the mammy and the women who work to take care of other’s children, it is the juxtaposition of the stereotype and the modern that truly highlights the differences in the two. Without the expected portrayal of the mammy, the complication of this character would be more difficult to accept for a mainstream audience.

Complicating the Historical Mammy

Though the mammy figure is often attributed to a “literary creation [rather] than a historical figure” (Hall 71), she is nonetheless a significant character in southern culture. Hall claims, “The idealization of the mammy [comes from] the New South movement’s touched-up picture of the South as a utopian community of harmonious relations” (68). The mammy may be a recognizable character, but the psychology and emotions are not frequently analyzed. Initially it appears that August will suffer the same treatment, but Prince-Blythewood instead begins to move away from the romanticized version of the black mammy. Though August enacts the role of mammy, it is June who continually reminds and resents August and Lily for their perpetuation

³ All citations hereafter included are taken from Prince-Blythewood’s Secret Life of Bees
of the mammy stereotype. June is cold and distant to Lily, refusing to help or assist her in any way. When May cooks Lily breakfast, it is June who shows disdain on her face. As Lily and August grow closer, June continually urges August to send Lily on her way, at times even suggesting to Lily that she has outstayed her welcome. June’s visible and vocal resentment towards white repression is manifested in her relationship with Lily. This recognition on June’s part of August’s emerging position as mammy works to reconstruct the way African-Americans viewed being placed in the position of semi-surrogate mother and caregiver. June’s resistance towards allowing a white child into her life as a black woman in the South functions as the resistance towards mammy-hood. Allowing the viewer to observe this less nostalgic vision of the mammy creates a potential re-writing of the mammy’s role in Southern culture.

The film continues to delineate the relationship between mammy and child as the viewer learns more about August and her previous relationship with Lily’s mother, Deborah (Hilarie Burton). August reveals to Lily that she used to take care of Deborah when she was a little girl. She was her mammy for seven years. It is also revealed that June resented August for working for Deborah’s family and raising a white family’s child. As August tells Lily about her mother and presents her with a box of her mother’s things, Lily remarks that August must have really loved Deborah to save all those things for all those years. August looks frustrated and hesitant before replying, “It was complicated. I was her nanny. Things were different in her world than mine. We like to think that love is pure and limitless, but love like that can’t exist in a hateful time.” August’s hesitation to admit that she loved Deborah and subsequent explanation of why she hesitates to use the word “love” in relation to her boss’s child indicates a shift in presentation of what it means to be a mammy. Prince-Blythewood’s portrayal of mammy and surrogacy as more complex and problematic than simply a woman taking on her “natural” role as a maternal
figure and loving this role that is forced upon her allows for those viewing the film to begin to understand the reality behind the African-American woman’s feelings towards being a mammy figure.

Perhaps the most obvious movement away from the traditional, romanticized mammy comes from Rosaleen. Early in the film Rosaleen is charged as Lily’s caregiver. While still at T. Ray’s home, it appears that Rosaleen enjoys taking care of Lily. She bakes her a birthday cake, is concerned when she has bloody knees from T. Ray’s punishments, and demands T. Ray give her money to buy Lily a training bra; however, after arriving at the Boatwright’s home, Rosaleen no longer has to take care of Lily. Rosaleen is given a freedom she has never had before. If Rosaleen had been the stereotypical mammy, she would have continued to raise and protect Lily out of love, regardless of her new found freedom. Instead, Rosaleen appears to forfeit her concerns about Lily’s wellbeing, seemingly relinquishing her role as the mammy. She moves out of the barn and into the main house, leaving Lily alone. She no longer cooks and cleans for Lily, and she is no longer the one Lily turns to for solace. Rosaleen’s actions after gaining some freedoms illustrate that, though the mammy’s work has for so long not been considered work because it was behavior that was “natural” and “maternal,” it is ultimately work against her will. The character of Rosaleen is important and essential in the attempt to portray the realities behind the black woman raising the white child.

While June’s bitterness and hesitation towards accepting Lily and August’s relationship begins to suggest a revision of popular culture’s understanding of the mammy, the potential breakthrough the film could have made is ultimately undermined by June’s eventual acceptance of Lily. Like August, June is not feminine and does not appear as a Southern lady. She has short hair, and she often wears pants and shirts rather than dresses. June conveys the tough love
approach towards those in her family and eventually to Lily as well. It is this portrayal that sets June up to embrace her role as a mammy figure. It is only Lily who is able to break June’s hard exterior and lack of emotion. After squirting June with the hose and a subsequent retaliation on June’s part, the two fall into the mud hysterically laughing. June begins to cry as she is finally able to release all of her pent up emotions. Lily grabs her hand, and the two lie there in the mud for a few seconds, still holding hands. It is at this moment that June ultimately embraces Lily and welcomes her into her home. She no longer resents the idea of assisting in raising a white girl because she begins to have maternal, familial feelings towards her. June’s definitive act of acceptance in relation to stepping into the maternal mammy role comes when T. Ray Owens (Paul Bettany) arrives at the Boatwright home to reclaim his daughter. When T. Ray attempts to take Lily away, June steps in and asserts her authority over the situation, ultimately intimidating T. Ray. The vision of black mammy “protecting” her white master, or master’s child, is one that is frequently seen when examining the mammy figure in popular culture and film. Even early films, such as Birth of a Nation (1915), depict the faithful mammy using violence to defend her master’s family (Barker 105). By interjecting herself into the circumstance in a hostile manner, June is affirming her position as a caretaker in Lily’s life and reverting to the stereotyped role of black mammy.

August, too, eventually seems to retract her stance on the complications and complexities of love in a mammy-child relationship, fundamentally stopping the attempt at restructuring the popular conceptions of the historical portrayals of this type of relationship. During her conversation with Lily regarding her time working as Deborah’s nanny, Lily suggests that August must have really loved Deborah. August explains that love in that type of relationship is complicated, reaffirming the complexities and issues not frequently talked about in mainstream
texts; however, August ultimately falls back into the archetypal mammy who loves the children she cares for by admitting to Lilly that Deborah “made her love her anyway.”

In addition to admitting her love towards Deborah, August confesses her love for Lily. When T. Ray comes to collect Lily, August steps in to request that Lily stay with the Boatwrights. She tells T. Ray, “We love Lily. We’ll get her started in school. We’ll take care of her, promise you that.” August’s plea to keep Lily, raise her, and ultimately mother her further place the black women in the film in the role of stereotyped mammy. The shift in feeling towards raising a white child by August and June ultimately fulfill the viewer’s expectations of what a mammy should do and feel. Because the mammy shown throughout history is one who is inherently maternal and caring, and one who enjoys taking care of others children suggesting that what they are doing is not actually work at all, August and June’s wishing to become mother to Lily causes them to take on the nostalgic image of the mammy. This eventual falling back into the mammy character can be seen as an undermining of the progress and modernity that the film begins to reveal towards the image of the stereotypical mammy, but the fact that the film even slightly shifts from the traditional structure of such a character by suggesting that the mammy’s role and feelings towards her role as such are not as clear-cut as so frequently shown can be seen as a radical change in perception.

The Black Madonna and Maternal Surrogacy

While the film creates the characters of August and June as some sort of reconceptualized mammy figures, it also places the Christian world’s ultimate mother, Mary, as a sort of mammy character because she is a black woman caring for a white child. Although the Black Madonna is a significant figure in history, its placement in this film as a mother who eventually “cares” for a white child can be seen as a further complication of the mammy. The
image of the Black Madonna can be seen in varying forms since 18,000 B.C. (Birnbaum 8). In the film, the Black Madonna is seen on both the labels for the honey jars and as a sculpture in the Boatwrights living room. She stands as a religious and maternal figure which the Boatwrights and their friends worship and look to for strength. When Lily asks August about the Black Madonna and the worship of her, August allows Lily into her circle of fellow black female worshipers and tells the story of the Black Madonna made of wood. August explains:

Back in the days of slavery, our people would go to the praise house on Sunday and ask the Lord to send them rescue. One day a slave named Obadiah was loading bricks on to a boat and he saw something that had washed up on shore. When he moved in closer, he saw that it was a wooden figure of a woman. Her body was growing out of a block of wood. A black woman. With her arm raised up and her fist balled up. And to his shock he heard her voice, clear as day. She said, ‘It’s alright. I’m here. I’ll be taking care of you now.’ And Obadiah knew at that moment that God had sent her. Now everyone knew that the mother of Jesus name was Mary, and she was strong and constant and had a mother’s heart. And here she was, sent to them across the same waters that had brought them there in chains. Seemed like she knew everything they saw. So, people went up one at a time and touched their hand to her chest, wanting to grab on to the solace in her heart they would feel their hearts were fearless. And if they ever grew weak, they had only to touch her heart again.

August’s description of both how the Black Madonna came about and its importance and role in their lives immediately places her in a maternal position. She exhibits the archetypal
characteristics of the perfect mother. She is caring, always there, able to provide support and strength, and accepting of everyone. She has “a mother’s heart.”

However, the fact that she is black and Lily, who eventually grows to look towards her for maternal love and protection as well, is white appears to create another mammy character in Lily’s life. Initially, June is resistant to letting Lily learn of the Black Madonna and her powerful involvement in the Boatwrights lives. This is mirrored in her resistance to allow Lily into the Boatwright’s lives and her resentment towards August for working for a white family. When Lily is told about the Black Madonna, she walks towards her with her hand outstretched as though she is going to touch her heart like so many others had. June stops playing her cello when she realizes what Lily is about to do. In June’s mind, allowing Lily to touch the sacred mother of so many repressed and enslaved African-Americans would cause the Black Madonna to fall into the role of caregiver to a white child. Lily stops before touching it, momentarily allowing the Black Madonna to remain not-mother for Lily.

Though initially the Black Madonna is protected or shielded from being a mother figure for Lily, she is eventually seen as maternal to Lily causing her to take on a mammy role. Once Lily is accepted into the Boatwright family by June and August, and T. Ray relinquishes paternal rights to her, the Black Madonna becomes a mother-figure to Lily. She acts as a protector and guardian to Lily. At the end of the film Lily reflects on her search for a mother and her eventual placement in the Boatwright household. She states to herself, “Lily, you are better off with all these mothers. I have more mothers than any three girls off the street. They are the moon shining over me…but Mary is always there. I feel her at unexpected moments. She will rise and when she does she does not go into the sky, but further inside me.” Lily’s own understanding of the roles of the women in her life, presumably the Boatwrights, Mary, and her own deceased mother
Deborah, is significant. She sees these women caring for her as strong maternal figures in her life, placing all but her own mother as mammy figures. She does not question the social significance of black women raising her because she assumes, like so many in history, that the women do not mind because it is maternal instinct to care for a child, regardless of race. Despite some initial hesitation, the willingness of the women in the film to take on the maternal role towards Lily further illustrates the mammy stereotype in *Secret Life of Bees*.

However, while the film may ultimately perpetuate the stereotype of the mammy despite attempts at creating a more developed and complicated relationship between mammy and child, *Secret Life of Bees* does create a more modern understanding of the idea of what it means to be a mother or motherly figure in the South. The film further builds upon the belief that being a mother and raising a child as a woman is not necessarily something that is done by one woman. Like the other two films discussed, Prince-Blythewood portrays motherhood as something that is a collaboration among multiple people. She further suggests that this more modern conception of mothering as a group effort is both more ideal and more beneficial to the child being cared for. Unlike the traditional portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship, being raised by multiple “mothers” creates a stronger female.

Throughout the film Lily is searching for her mother. As she puts it, her “whole life has been a hole where [her] mother should have been.” After accidentally killing her mother as a four year old child, Lily seeks out the truth surrounding her mother’s disappearance and subsequent return which precedes her death. After suffering a breakdown similar to Vivi’s, Deborah leaves Lily behind and escapes to the Boatwrights. However, she eventually recovers and returns to T. Ray to get Lily and the rest of her things. Though T. Ray has led Lily to believe her mother never wanted her and was only coming back for her clothes, Lily continually resists this explanation.
and seeks the truth. It is this quest that results in her arrival at the Boatwrights door; however, in her search she finds not only the truth about her birth mother, ultimately allowing her to fully accept Deborah as her mother, but multiple other women who take on the role of mother.

The fact that Lily is fourteen in the film is significant in her possible reasons for becoming entranced by the need to find out the truth about her mother. As a fourteen year old girl living in the South and being raised by her father, Lily has no one to teach her how to be a lady. The only female character in her life before meeting the Boatwrights is Rosaleen, who is ultimately T. Ray’s employee. Though Rosaleen appears to care for Lily (she makes her a birthday cake) and attempts to lead Lily into womanhood properly (she has T. Ray give her money to take Lily to get a bra), she essentially still cannot teach Lily how to be a proper Southern lady because she is black.
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The progressive stance that each of the films discussed take in relation to motherhood, female friendship, race, and even occasionally patriarchal religion is even more progressive when looked at as mainstream, Hollywood chick flicks. Their modernity is also unique because all three films take place in the South. While Steel Magnolias, Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood, and Secret Life of Bees all clearly elicit southern cultural expectations and stereotypes, these nostalgic images do not override or annul the modern cultural and filmic significance of the themes each tackles.

In fact, it is these stereotypes that allow for the films modernization. It is important for these films to reach the desired audience and meet that audience’s expectations. The unique thing about chick ficks is their ability to attract women of all ages. By incorporating these expected images of southern women and southern life, the audience is able to recognize familiarity in the films and their characters. If the modernity of the “New South” was portrayed without any remnants of the romanticized South so prevalent in pop culture and the minds of those viewing these films, this modernity would be harder to accept. By highlighting the predictable characters, actions, and cues that let the audience know where the film is taking place, the filmmakers are able to, in effect, sneak in the more complex ideas of group mothering and matriarchal power and feminism.

In each of the films, the modernization of motherhood and the dominance of matriarchy illustrate an emerging South that is not simply the region seen in Gone with the Wind. Particularly, the presence of maternal centered religion and the new age ideas show a move towards feminism and women empowerment in a traditionally patriarchal, chauvinistic area of America. However, though these films are progressive in relation to other films in the genre, they
are far from ideal in their presentation of southern women, southern motherhood, and the South itself. Each movie eventually succumbs to the Hollywood happy ending, occasionally evoking a feeling of failure on the part of the filmmakers. These three films, and similar films not discussed at length, need to maintain this trajectory towards creating a more complex, round depiction of southern women in relation to southern motherhood. Not all southern mothers are M’Lynn (angel), Vivi (absent), or August (surrogate/mammy). Not all daughters have one mother and one father. Not all southern women are white, middle-class belles or ladies. The images and mythologies of the South may be identifiable and historically linked to the Antebellum South, but they do not define the region as a whole.

These films may not create a new understanding of the South or women in film, but to simply ignore them altogether because they are not considered “high art” films is missing a valuable and important piece of American feminine culture. While the study of mainstream films, specifically chick flics, is not always given validity by some scholars or members of the film community, the messages and portrayals of the characters in the films can ultimately influence the way individuals are perceived in culture, as well as the way individuals perceive themselves. This is especially prevalent when dealing with women in film, and the study of women in film is becoming a popular field. When films like the three analyzed in this thesis are reaching the masses, the individuals and ideologies they present are what affect and influence the masses.

*Steel Magnolias* and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* consistently rank in lists detailing the “Top Chick Flicks of all Times” (Durbin). *Secret Life of Bees* was nominated for fourteen awards, of which it won ten ranging from People’s Choice Award for best Movie Drama to a Hollywood Film Award for best Ensemble Acting in a Cast (“Steel Magnolias”).
These films are clearly reaching a large population of people, particularly women, so it seems only necessary and appropriate to examine the portrayals the films are presenting. It is essential to question whether these films are restructuring the patriarchal ideals set forth in other texts, whether these women in chick flicks are actually creating a new way to “be” a woman, or whether they are simply reinforcing the domestic gender roles set before them.

In her afterward in *Chick Flicks*, Karen Hollinger suggests there are specific questions we must ask ourselves when analyzing and viewing chick flicks. She writes:

- Do they raise questions that challenge women’s prescribed gender roles and the role of female friendship in women’s lives…? Do they embody the complexities of women’s lives or merely reflect male views of women? …And the ultimate question then becomes the old one that feminists for decades have been asking about woman-oriented cinema: in the final analysis are these films good or bad for women? (Hollinger, *Chick Flicks* 231)

In applying these questions to the films reviewed in this thesis, though the films may not challenge the prescribed gender roles of females, but they do challenge the traditional view of southern motherhood and the roles of female friends in their lives. As in *Divine Secrets*, the female friends are no longer scared of breaking the taboo of interfering with other’s children. In *Steel Magnolias*, no longer are southern women shown to be weak creatures devoted to their husbands. In *Secret Life of Bees*, the actual relationship between slave mammy and child is questioned. These films are problematic in some instances, but their ability to present new images of a very old theme, southern motherhood, must be acknowledged.
WORKS CITED


