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The Wicked Bitch of the East:

Feminine Resistance in Taylor Hackford’s *Dolores Claiborne*

**Key-words**: feminism, melodrama, bitch, resistance, patriarchy

**Abstract**: At the center of Taylor Hackford’s 1995 film, *Dolores Claiborne*, is an eclipse. While the symbolism inherent in such an event is clear to most viewers, the eclipse at the core of this adaptation of Stephen King’s novel signals a change beyond the film: for women, for melodrama and for the label “bitch.” For decades, no one calling themselves a feminist would ever have desired this label. But using the example of the word’s usage in a contemporary melodrama like *Dolores Claiborne*, I’d like to make an argument for the reclamation of this term as one describing a quality in women that represents a positive, powerful feminine resistance. Hackford’s film deploys the label “bitch” in a variety of ways, but when the women of the film embrace their own definition of “bitch”, the valence of the label changes. Instead of working as a negative label for difficult women, “bitch” becomes a signifier of inner strength, feminine community and resistance to patriarchal norms. That this reinterpretation of “bitch” as an effective feminine force of resistance lies at the center of a melodrama—a film genre traditionally aimed at women and a type of film notorious for reconstructing patriarchal norms—bears some exploration.

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literally, an eclipse occurs when the moon passes between the sun and the earth, creating an engulfing shadow. But used as a verb, “to eclipse” also indicates conversion, a literal overshadowing. In Hackford’s film, the eclipse is a moment when the film’s eponymous heroine goes beyond her typical role as wife and mother to become the protector of her child, and the destroyer of her husband—she transcends her typical, conventional role. It’s also a moment when, through those actions, she becomes more than she was before, and enters into a community of women who quietly but effectively resist the “depressingly masculine world” they inhabit. It might be the exact moment Dolores truly embraces being a bitch.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “bitch” firstly as a female dog, but the word’s most recognized and popular meaning is its usage disparaging human females. For this definition, the OED describes “bitch” as a term illustrating “a lewd or sensual woman,” or, in what the reference calls “modern use,” “a malicious or treacherous woman.” Further, when used to describe inanimate objects, the word delineates “something outstandingly difficult or unpleasant.” For decades, no one calling themselves a feminist would ever have desired this label. However, by using the example of the word’s usage in a contemporary melodrama like *Dolores Claiborne*, I would like to make an argument for the reclamation of this term as one describing a quality in women that, while it may make them “outstandingly difficult or unpleasant” for the accepted structures of patriarchy, represents a positive, powerful feminine resistance.

Hackford’s film deploys the label “bitch” in a variety of ways, including some of the more disparaging usages referred to above. Joe St. George frequently calls Dolores a bitch while simultaneously criticizing her body, her cooking, and her parenting skills. Teenage vandals on the Island call Dolores a “goddamn illiterate bitch” when they come marauding around her home at night. Her own daughter, Selena, calls her a “crazy bitch” because Dolores paints an
unflattering portrait of Selena’s father. But when the women of the film come to embrace “bitch” in their own way, and to use this term amongst themselves, the valence of the label changes, becoming a signifier of inner strength, feminine community and resistance to patriarchal norms. That this reinterpretation of “bitch” as an effective feminine force of resistance lies at the center of a melodrama—a film genre traditionally aimed at women and a type of film notorious for reconstructing patriarchal norms—bears some exploration.

Calling *Dolores Claiborne* a contemporary melodrama is not without its pitfalls, not only because delineating a genre can limit possible interpretive angles, but also because it seems a particularly fraught move to claim that a melodrama could have a progressive impact on the depiction of women in film; in the past, melodramas have not always been particularly subversive to patriarchal power structures. King is mainly a writer of horror, and *Dolores Claiborne* could easily fall under such genre types as drama, thriller, or mystery— but most critics do agree that the film is in fact a melodrama. Melodramas as a film genre are differentiated from other films most significantly by their subject matter, by their music, and by their intense emotional appeal. Within these categoric confines, melodramas themselves typically fall into several pre-defined categories based on the foci of their central conflict. These categories include sub-genres such as the social-problem film, the maternal melodrama, and the romantic melodrama, all recognized by scholars in the field for their distinctive features. Virtually all melodramas have been lumped together as a genre designated for women: principal characters are usually women, and the problems and issues contained in these films are often seen as the province of women. Social problem films revolve around domestic and sexual violence (usually perpetrated against women). Maternal melodramas—as the moniker would suggest—deal largely with the sometimes complicated relationships among women in the same family. Romantic melodramas are most often focused on sexual relationships, most of the time
promoting the woman’s perspective. But because of the gender of the melodrama’s primary intended audience, explicit use of a term like “bitch,” also—significantly—aimed at women, needs some explanation.

Theresa Thompson insists that King’s novel struggles “in its narrative form to present a fully developed female character, to explore the contours of women’s existence in our culture, and to speak with an ‘authentic’ female voice” (7). This assured focus on women in the text and film would certainly place the narrative in the realm of the melodrama, and if Thompson’s assertion is accepted, King’s work to create “authentic” female voices by creating bitchy characters is indeed progressive within this form. And while Phyllis Frus notes that melodramas “feature victim-heroes about whom we care, who are involved in stories that allow us to recognize their ‘moral value,’” and are therefore “complicit in the ongoing celebration of the family in its idealized form” (239), Dolores Claiborne seems to resist the traditional “idealized” family, suggesting instead that female community and shared female experience are more effective and important than the film’s presentation of clearly flawed patriarchal society. Society labels these women bitches, using the term in its most common and most problematic sense, and yet the women in this film can be seen to reclaim the label, repurposing it for positive effect.

The contemporary connotation of “bitch” is mostly a negative one, and therefore the term is not usually applied to women in a complimentary way. Because of this cultural and societal stigma, the overwhelming majority of women would prefer not to be labeled with this term, making it an intriguing component of films primarily intended for and consumed by women. In the long trajectory of melodrama, viewers can point to specific films—interestingly also named for women—where even the suggestion that a woman may possess characteristics considered

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1 A notable exception to this general use of the sub-genre categorization would be romantic melodramas examining same-sex couples, such as Brokeback Mountain (2005). Brokeback is, in many ways, a groundbreaking film simply because it does not treat homosexual relationships as comedy.
bitchy is cause for punishment. In *Stella Dallas* (1937), it is implied that Stella is a bad mother because she desires to have a social life after the birth of her daughter, and the rest of the film suggests that any desire on Stella’s part, other than that which is directed toward her child, is misplaced and unseemly, and cause for Stella to be deprived of her child and rendered destitute. *Mildred Pierce* (1945) rewards its title character’s economic success with personal turmoil because her business capitalizes on a middle-class work-ethic, yet her daughter Veda’s corrupt acts aimed at gaining material wealth and better economic class are also punished when she commits murder and goes to jail. All these women are viewed as “difficult,” “malicious,” and/or “treacherous” by the male characters that make up the society around them. Therefore, because these previous women of the melodramatic cinesphere could have been labeled “bitches,” it is compelling that the reclamation of “bitch” occurs within the genre of the film melodrama, and especially in another film named for a woman, showing a specific and significant change in the ways in which female characters are treated in a genre aimed at women in particular. *Dolores Claiborne* differentiates itself from its predecessors because it presents the viewer with a world in which the bitch is part of a community of women who actually successfully resist patriarchy.

What sort of melodrama *Dolores Claiborne* is meant to evoke seems to be a more difficult question to answer. The film can be, at points, a maternal melodrama centering on the lives of Dolores and her daughter, Selena; a social problem film addressing the lack of options available for victims of domestic violence and child abuse; or a romantic melodrama that examines equally the platonic, deeply emotional and communal relationships between women.² While aspects of the film fills the bill for each of these categories, I would postulate a different categorization for a

² To clarify, this romance is not sexual, but a deep emotional love existing in the film between pairs of women, Vera and Dolores; Dolores and Selena. King also emphasizes this love in his novel, as Dolores says that “you mightn’t think a hard-talking old bitch like me believes in love, but the truth is it’s just about the only thing I do believe in” (238).
film like *Dolores Claiborne*, a kind of women’s film that is uncommon because within it, being a bitch allows these women to resist patriarchy without losing their femininity—bitchiness is, in fact, an expressly female power that rivals masculinity without characterizing these women as masculine. Labeling these resistant women as bitches also results in the formation of a community within the oppressive patriarchal structure, where the members are interconnected, draw strength from one another, and put pressure on patriarchy not only as individuals, but also as a collective.

As a maternal melodrama, viewers may zero in on Dolores and her estranged daughter Selena. Salty as Dolores seems, she does have a heart, and viewers can best observe this heart in the many examples present in the film of her devotion and motherly sacrifice for Selena. Examinations of the mother-daughter dyad have been a central component of classic maternal melodramas such as Vidor’s 1937 *Stella Dallas* and Curtis’ 1945 *Mildred Pierce*. Though in King’s novel Dolores has two other children and Selena never appears on Little Tall Island during the course of the narrative, Hackford’s film version casts Selena as a key character who measures the importance of Dolores’ guilt or innocence in relation to two crimes: the death of Vera Donovan and the eighteen years past death of Dolores’ husband, Joe St. George. As Dolores repeatedly asserts, it’s not what the world thinks of her that matters, but what Selena perceives. Dolores promotes truth, no matter how transgressive or painful it may be. Joe’s death illustrates that Dolores sees her mother-daughter relationship as the most important one in her life. Additionally, Selena’s alignment with patriarchy for most of the film illuminates its faults. These melodramatic conventions, then, clearly link *Dolores Claiborne* with the tradition of the maternal melodrama.
But *Dolores Claiborne* is also a social problem film. The problems here are domestic violence, child abuse and incest. Through flashbacks of Dolores’ memory, we see Joe pummel her across the back with a heavy piece of wood and choke and batter her. Viewers learn about Joe’s incestuous transgression, raping the thirteen-year-old Selena, as Dolores tells the story to her daughter so she can regain her memory of the incident (albeit involuntarily). Psychologist and film scholar Janet Walker notes that children often experience intense shame about sexual abuse that then leads to repression, a symptom of “a power imbalance between the child and the adult” (52). Selena is a clear example of this sort of repression. And though Frus believes that Selena’s memory of Dolores as the abusive parent is “part of a backlash against the women’s movement,” it is important to note that by the end of the film Selena’s perception of the truth of her past has been recovered, that she accepts the difficulties of that truth in order to restore her connection to and relationship with her mother, and that she embraces bitch identity as a tool to do so (233). Frus notes a tradition in films about domestic violence where the heroine/victim kills in self-defense, and while Dolores kills selflessly, it is important to remember her assertion that she kills in her daughter’s defense, emphasizing the connection between women in an act of resistance to patriarchal oppression (237). Dolores’ emphasis on truth and the truth of her memory, which in most instances is in direct conflict with traditionally perceived gender roles, is of great importance in the film and finally allows Selena to deal with her past trauma. We might see class division as a social problem as well, but again, *Dolores Claiborne* fills those gaps with the value of feminine camaraderie and solidarity. If *Dolores Claiborne* is a social problem film, it seems to attempt to solve those problems by allowing women the latitude to exercise bitch identity.

But bitches can also care very deeply about each other. If romantic melodrama can include deep emotional platonic connections, *Dolores Claiborne* may also fall into this category, and may, in such a permutation, reveal some of its most progressive tendencies. Hackford’s
treatment of King’s novel hints that the love between women in the film goes beyond friendship and into the realm of the romantic, and may also ask viewers to reconsider the meaning of that term. Vera and Dolores “stay together” even after Selena is safely away from Little Tall Island and Joe is dead, and Dolores is with Vera constantly as she degenerates physically and mentally in old age, visually suggesting an old married couple; a flashback of Dolores and Vera sitting together holding hands moves Dolores to tears after Vera’s death. While Dolores could be merely Vera’s hired caregiver, Selena asserts at the inquest that “these two women loved each other.” Significantly, the men in the room smile and snicker at such a suggestion. Detective Mackey openly mocks the connection and also perpetuates the stereotype of women’s romance existing for men’s enjoyment when he says “Really? That’s something we would like to hear about.” The men’s leap to sexual insinuation reveals the limits of how they imagine relationships between women to work, while at the same time their laughter signifies their discomfort with the idea that two women like Dolores and Vera could have a “loving” relationship that did not include the sexual.

_Dolores Claiborne_ may well help to expand the romantic melodrama subgenre by suggesting that “romantic” need not necessarily also mean “sexual,” especially since its exemplars are two old, cranky, not conventionally beautiful women. These women have also both participated in heterosexual relationships that were clearly dysfunctional: Joe was abusive to his wife and his daughter, and Vera’s husband was allegedly unfaithful. While the female relationships in the film are certainly not picture-perfect, they do cast “romantic” in a light that would also illuminate an honest, true connection, not one ostensibly marred by implied patriarchal power relations. “Love” and “truth” are two words/themes that are deeply mined during the course of the film, so perhaps it is not out of character for the film to investigate,
through these complex characters, the idea of romance through non-normative, female relationships.

While the men in the inquest may focus on Dolores and Vera as a “couple,” Dolores and Selena also have a romanticized moment after the inquest. Selena has returned to Little Tall Island to defend her mother, and as they say goodbye at the ferry Selena admits lying about her journalism assignment in Arizona. They embrace with much more feeling than at the beginning of the film, a moment when—significantly, I believe— they were surrounded by men and Dolores did not know her daughter after so many years, as if Selena’s time away from the community of other women and in the world of patriarchal drives had rendered her unrecognizable. Now, Selena clutches Dolores and says “I don’t want to lose you again.” Dolores assures her that their renewed connection is permanent, and Selena acknowledges that her mother has sacrificed much for her sake. They leave the film having re-established their mother-daughter bond and increased its value.

But all of these different interpretations on what type of melodrama Dolores Claiborne finally is are somehow inadequate. Traditionally each category of melodrama contains a heterosexual pair at its center, or at least characters that present versions of a patriarchy that assigns gendered traits to each individual in a way that supports the reconstitution of the patriarchal system, however flawed. In films such as Mildred Pierce and Stella Dallas, women capitulate in some way in order for the patriarchy to continue unchanged. Stella does give up her daughter Laurel so that Laurel can have a traditionally prescribed life with a husband (whose social class elevates Laurel’s humble beginnings), and it is implied that Mildred reconciles with her former husband— in spite of his longstanding affair with their neighbor—after her daughter, the murderous and duplicitous Vida, is taken to jail for her crimes. Dolores Claiborne separates itself from these previous films by allowing its women their bitchy behavior, creating a space
comprised entirely of women independent of men, and changing the way they participate in patriarchy by depending on each other. Any restriction these women may experience at the hands of the patriarchal society—and their existences are surely not facilitated by the world they inhabit—that society is, in the end, a bit weaker for having been interrogated and resisted by them. The film uses women engaged in specific acts of resistance to show feminine power, and uses devices of memory and color to track the changes that the characters make to the system that tries to hold them in place.

Though there are many moments in Dolores Claiborne when women are obviously trapped or manipulated by the “depressingly masculine world,” the women in the film rely on each other and their internalization and progressive enactment of the term “bitch” to transcend the patriarchal forces that attempt to oppress them. Allowing the three female characters internalizing “bitch” in a positive way that promotes power, community and solidarity among women—even those of different economic status—is a significant reason to view Hackford’s film as an important gesture to a different type of women’s picture or melodrama. In this film, women can imagine actively resisting patriarchy without being permanently and/or decisively punished. While they escape from any sort of negative final pronouncement of their fates, the women of Dolores Claiborne don’t have it easy, and in fact, use these (sometimes literal) trials in order to strengthen their individual resolve and their communal bonds. Though we see these trials literally manifest themselves in the conflicts between these women and traditional, patriarchal society, their struggle and progress can also be charted symbolically through color.

In the case of Dolores Claiborne, conflict (and bitchiness) seems to be denoted in Vera, Dolores, and Selena through the use of the color red.

Though color saturation is a specific convention of Sirkian melodrama and is sometimes used in other types of films to indicate differences between past and present, nostalgia and reality,
color in *Dolores Claiborne* goes beyond even those symbolic uses. Red, in particular, is an important and complicated color in the world of *Dolores Claiborne*. It signifies both positive and negative desire and the turmoil beneath the surface of everyday life in Dolores’s world, the complicated road by which the women in the film come to both harness and embrace their own bitchiness, as well as the bitch identity of other women. Vera’s association with red appears early in the film, in the sighting of her blood after the aged woman has fallen (or been pushed by Dolores) down the stairs. Vera is ostensibly the progenitor of this coven of bitches, though because of the non-linear structure of the film, viewers can only see the full spectrum of her relationship with Dolores when the film is complete. Her particular association with blood, therefore, is significant: she “passes on” her bitchiness to other women, specifically Dolores; a bloodline of bitches. The three women are bound by the blood of others—Dolores to Vera’s death, as well as to Joe’s, and Selena to Dolores in a more familial sense. And because, when dealing with female characters, blood is also associated with menstruation and reproduction, the “reproduction” of bitches lies heavily with Vera.

Vera is the most economically advantaged of the three women in the film, but is still unhappy—a cheating husband prevents her from realizing the harmony of a good marriage in connection to her material wealth. And though her eclipse party is abuzz with “people,” some of whom have traveled “more than eight hundred miles” to see the celestial event, for much of the film Vera is isolated, living out her purportedly privileged days within the confines of her lavish home on one of the many cliffs of Little Tall Island. Her one constant companion is Dolores, who is also her employee. Vera’s privilege perhaps facilitates her ability to harness the “bitch” mentality; because she is of a high economic status, she already holds some power over others as their financial and social better. But her loneliness injects that power with bitterness, leading her to—as the narrative implies—cause the brake lines on her husband’s car to mysteriously “fail” as
he leaves his mistress’s apartment. “Husbands die,” she intones, “and they leave their wives their money.” Thus the audience is given to assume that Vera also has blood on her hands. Vera’s attitude would seem to imply that her life is much happier without her husband, without the worry and emotional hardship that women in loveless marriages might be seen to endure. Vera survives because of this power to control her own fate, and so when Dolores comes to her distraught over her own husband’s theft of Selena’s college money and his probable sexual abuse of his daughter, Vera is able to do two things: show Dolores the ineffectiveness of her initial plan for escaping Joe, and give her the tools with which to combat his power over her.

Vera perhaps recognizes in Dolores a kindred spirit, calling her a “stone hard woman.” But Dolores also has her breaking point. While Vera wittily dismisses the theft of the money, when Dolores confesses her suspicions about Joe and Selena, Vera’s tone turns serious. “An accident,” she says, “can be an unhappy woman’s best friend.” But her passing on of the bitch mentality does not stop at a verbal cue. On the day of the eclipse, Vera opens the door for Dolores to pass into self-assured bitchdom. She gives Dolores the afternoon off, handing her a set of reflector boxes and eclipse viewers, and implying that she might want to share “this historic event” with her husband. Though Dolores initially resists, Vera intensely passes on this information: “Sometimes being a bitch is all a woman has to hang on to. Sometimes, a woman has to be a high-riding bitch to survive.” As she speaks, the bright and sunny hues of the scene darken as a cloud seems to pass over the two women. This darkness, this mini-eclipse, emphasizes the seriousness of Vera’s proclamation: without bitch identity, she asserts, all is lost. By passing on this idea of survival and giving Dolores some of the tools necessary to gain her own foothold in the ideology of the bitch, Vera Donovan sets Dolores on the path that will come to characterize her for the rest of her life.
Dolores puts Vera’s ideology into practice during the eclipse, an event marked in the film by the most blatant display of bitch identity as well as the high point of the use of red in the color palette. Red starts small here, appearing in Dolores’s shoes and in the tiny floral print of her dress—admittedly feminine details. Dolores herself also begins the scene in a seemingly submissive and subservient posture, fixing Joe his dinner and being inordinately cordial to him as he drinks himself into a stupor. But then Dolores unveils herself as a “high-riding bitch,” openly accusing Joe of sexual assault on Selena, insulting his manhood and physically attacking him. These actions are certainly not typically considered feminine, but they are considered “bitchy.” They create conflict, pushing at patriarchy; they resist—in part because of Vera Donovan—the oppression Dolores and Selena are both subjected to. Later, as Dolores stands over the well that has swallowed her abusive husband, the moon passes in front of the sun and the entire world is bathed in a red glow, affirming Dolores’ action and producing an almost angelic aura above her head. Red is pervasive in the “surreal” background colors, and “suffuses the scene with a golden glow, suggesting rebirth, renewal, and conversion” (Grindstaff 166).

Years later, as Dolores cares for Vera in her old age, Dolores shows that she has indeed internalized the ideology of the bitch, and that those around her notice this status, even if they do not respect it. Town kids call Dolores “a goddamn illiterate bitch” when they come to her home at night, but don’t show their faces. When forced to confront painful memories at her mother’s insistence, Selena also calls Dolores a “crazy bitch.” These individuals label Dolores a “bitch” in the most typical, angry and defensive way. But Dolores puts this word into use in ways that are not typical when she uses the term almost lovingly when speaking with Vera, calling her a “smelly bitch” after she’s soiled herself in the grip of an Alzheimer’s fog. While some female viewers may find this use of “bitch” off-putting, the use of the word by both characters to describe a particular attitude that they share is significant. This verbal connection then also gives
literal voice to the communion the two have formed, a relationship built on reciprocal support and reliance. Vera gives Dolores the tools she required to deal with a crisis in her life, and Dolores supports Vera when she is physically unable to help herself. Their relationship, moreover, is much more than that of employee and employer, enabler and caretaker. As Selena comes to observe, “these women love[d] each other.”

Love is something Selena herself has a traumatic relationship with, especially concerning her parents. Selena returns to Little Tall Island after fifteen years because of Dolores’s involvement in Vera’s death, and eighteen years after the “accidental” death of her father, facilitated by Vera—the older woman’s legacy is not merely the more than a million and a half dollars she leaves to Dolores in her will, but also her connection to both Dolores and Selena, a sort of generational feminine currency of the bitch. Yet Selena resists the progressive implication of bitch community in her initial interaction with Dolores, using the term as a weapon against her mother when Dolores tries to restore Selena’s painful memories of her father. As they are reintroduced to each other, red pervades the evening sunset above Dolores’s ramshackle home and the door the two of them must literally pass through before they can face their conflict over Joe’s death. Here, red seems to indicate a warning of the difficulty to come, a potential signal to stop. Within the confines of that house, steeped in unbidden and rejected memories, Selena calls Dolores a “crazy old lying bitch” and relies on the tools of patriarchy to try to “fix” the feelings that she later admits have “consumed” her—primarily drugs and alcoholism— which of course also links Selena to her father in habit.

Selena’s declaration that Dolores is a crazy bitch is a defense against what she rejects, a version of her own history wherein she cannot blame Dolores for her troubles, but must instead own up to the fact that she was a victim of sexual assault at the hands of her father. Doing this certainly isn’t easy, and the difficult process might be compared to Dolores’s own difficulties
processing the idea that her husband was abusing her daughter, as well as deciding what she is going to do about it. Truth, in the world of Dolores Claiborne, often hurts. If we imagine patriarchy’s typical usage of “bitch” to mean “something outstandingly difficult or unpleasant” as the OED contends, we can surely see how Selena’s use of the word in connection with her mother and these painful memories coincides with this idea. The ideas that Dolores is pushing Selena aren’t easy ones to process, but they are true ones.

Selena’s initial resistance to these memories casts her as an individual with both feet in the patriarchy, though one could argue the system isn’t working all that well for her: she’s sleeping with her boss for the good writing assignments, is admittedly “consumed” by her past, takes a raft of prescription drugs to mask those emotions, and has personal relationships with only “a lot of nobodies.” This existence, in the patriarchal culture, is characterized as success—a good job and a life away from her troubled past. In actuality, and what Dolores (maybe inadvertently) exposes is that all patriarchy has done for Selena is to provide her with the tools to deny and bury her past. Dolores’s way may not be an easy path, but it is one free from the constructs that impose a particular definition of “fine,” which is what Selena assures Dolores she’ll be after she pops a few pills and weeps through a panic attack brought on by being confronted with her relationship with her father. To signify her deeply embedded conflict, one that literally takes its seat in her memory of herself and her childhood, red is used in association with Selena embedded in taillights (signifying a halt, a block to her memory, or a warning that a dangerous epiphany may occur), in the oversized shirt she wears as a young girl when rejecting her mother’s “crazy ideas,” as well as in her flashback sequence on the ferry.

Later, as she plans to leave Little Tall Island, it seems Selena at least knows how to parrot alternative uses of bitch, and to apply it—even sarcastically—to herself. As she leaves Dolores’s house, she repeats Vera’s assertion that “sometimes being a bitch is all a woman has to hold on
to.” Because this repetition comes in the form of an apology to Dolores for being “difficult,” and because in this line Selena acknowledges not only that she may be a bitch but also acknowledges the links that tie Vera, Dolores and herself together, we might view this usage as a small step toward the community that such a connection offers. Dolores registers recognition of this familiar phrase in her facial expression: at first surprise, but then a hint of a satisfied smile. If she has done nothing else in Selena’s short time back on the Island, she has at least exposed her to the truth of their past, whether Selena accepts it or no. Dolores has done her best to pass along to her daughter the strength that might be garnered by an alternative to patriarchy—the community of the bitch.

Once Selena has listened to Dolores’s taped confession of these events, she must struggle with the ways in which such a truth will affect her. On the ferry as she leaves the island, Selena finally experiences her own flashback—these have been happening with frequency in the film up to this point as narrative embeds itself in narrative and memory within memory. Selena’s experience of a flashback may be another indicator that she is being opened up to a non-linear (and therefore less staunchly patriarchal) way of seeing. Previously in the film, Hackford has assigned such non-linear experience and memory only to Dolores (and, thereby, the viewer). Now, when he plays with memory and narrative, Selena participates—she is crossing a threshold into the feminine community. In Selena’s vision, when she sees her young self and her father on the ferry, during a moment of abuse, the scene is infused with red—from the deck of the boat itself to the hues of the cars being transported on it—perhaps indicating the dangerous situation she is finally able to recognize. Immediately afterward, she has a second vision of herself in the ferry restroom where she looks up into the mirror to see not her reflection, but the back of her own head. After the revelation of her memory, everything is backward and reversed: her memory of her mother’s past is not as she’s remembered it for many years, and her memory of her own
past, she has discovered, is flawed. It’s at this point that Selena decides to return to the Island and defend her mother—to become part of the reciprocal support network that this new idea of the bitch might provide.

At the inquest, armed with her knowledge of the truth from Dolores’s confession, and with her knowledge of how the patriarchal culture views “bitches,” Selena uses Detective Mackey’s own logic to defeat him. She is also able to focus in this logic on the deep personal relationship between Dolores and Vera, creating a fusion of patriarchal logic and female connection. This skillful manipulation of the patriarchal Law that still acknowledges women’s connections is a perfect illustration of how the bitch may not overhaul oppressive constructs completely, but at least generates free space within them. It also suggests that Selena is becoming one formidable bitch.

With Mackey—and by extension, patriarchy—at least temporarily held off using a fusion of love and logic by way of bitch identity, Selena is able to turn her attention to mending her broken relationship with Dolores. When Selena arrived on the Island, life “out in the world” had taught her that connections with other women were either futile or based on competition; viewers observe this attitude throughout the film in her interactions with Dolores and more oblique references to the women she works with. The idea that this mother-daughter and woman to woman relationship is now important to her is another signal that Selena, the youngest of the three women of Dolores Claiborne, is in a position to embrace bitch community, and her status as that youngest woman also suggests that young women beyond the world of the film may benefit from this positioning as well. Grindstaff notes that the film’s “aim to restore the relationship between Dolores and Selena links Dolores Claiborne to the maternal melodrama” but, in my opinion, also moves it beyond that sub-type (151). In Mildred Pierce, the Law finally corrals the diabolical, uncontrollable daughter and puts her in jail; here Dolores goes free in spite
of her transgressions. In *Stella Dallas*, Stella watches, separated from the scene, as her daughter escapes the class that Stella herself signifies; here Dolores has given her daughter a life outside the claustrophobic atmosphere of Little Tall Island and at the same time has successfully bridged the class boundaries between her and Selena, rekindling their relationship.

In the final scenes, *Dolores Claiborne* uses melodramatic tropes to emphasize the potentially changing values of this type of film. As Selena and Dolores again bid each other farewell at the ferry dock, the oppressive grey world they have inhabited throughout the film is still in place, piqued only by Dolores’s muted red scarf. By this point, we’ve seen the myriad ways this color has been deployed, both in the service of the bitch as well as a signifier of the forces that oppose her. Because of this complexity, viewers can see Dolores’s wearing of the color as a representation of the sometimes ambivalent nature of the bitch’s position in the world: as both that “difficult and unpleasant” thing as well as a positively resistant and multifaceted thing. The final use of red in Dolores’ scarf at the end of the film is therefore loaded with significance: it is a color of passion, but also signifies the rocky road that the women we see have already come by, and will have to continue to travel. Though Selena is still emotionally troubled by the events that have transpired over the course of the film, she is now able to admit that Dolores “did it for [her].” able to acknowledge the connection the two have always had, even during the years when Selena herself attempted to deny such a connection existed. With Dolores’s assurances that their connection will not be lost, Selena boards the ferry to destinations unknown as the film’s somber theme swells and the scene fades to black.

Though not an especially uplifting ending—no sunshine, rainbows, or dancing in the streets as women triumph over traditional societal systems—the final scene indicate that Selena is being returned to the patriarchal world with her weaknesses shored up by her relationships to other women, and in this way *Dolores Claiborne* makes room for repair, healing and community.
where other melodramas have been unable to. Though some have seen the community between the women of *Dolores Claiborne* as “the common bond of gender oppression” (Grindstaff 161), and have noted that the narrative “struggles to voice the concerns of an ill-educated woman forced by circumstances to commit murder” (Thompson 49), I believe that the film does not highlight the oppression that binds these women, but the resistance. The film’s denouement does not privilege the oppression of the masculine power structure, but the connections forged between the women that resist it. Their reclamation of the label “bitch,” and their ability to embrace it as a signifier of that connection is surely a progressive, if not wholeheartedly radical use of the melodramatic genre—a genre typically seen to reinforce feminine weakness or at least punish feminine strength. Because of its complex treatment of women troubled by the masculine world and its workings, *Dolores Claiborne* seems poised to initiate an alternative path in the women’s film, one where being a bitch is not actually a bad thing.
Works Cited


Thompson, Theresa. “Rituals of Male Violence: Unlocking the (Fe)Male Self in Gerald’s Game and Dolores Claiborne.” Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of