

Sister My Sister

Let's Pretend I'm Her

This film's superficial similarities to *Heavenly Creatures* are obvious. Like works-in-tandem, both films begin with an interrupted black-and-white sequence featuring two girls and a woman who may be their mother. There are color flashforwards to crime scenes. The stories are based on actual events, each involving two seemingly proper young women who kill a woman who caused them separation anxiety. Both films end with a protagonist screaming from the darkness as she is being separated from her beloved sister or pseudo-sister, after which white captions on a black background relate the results of a trial and the ultimate fate of the murderers, referring to something that never happened again.

In *Heavenly Creatures*, surrogate sisters combine against a biological mother. Here, biological sisters combine against a surrogate mother. Another film to be mentioned in this category is Pawel Pawlikowski's *My Summer of Love*, in which one principal character wears the clothes of her lover's sister. (In addition to its superficially similar sexual dynamics, *My Summer of Love* also shares several specific details with *Heavenly Creatures*, including girls frolicking partly undressed in the forest, their talk of travel to exotic locales, one girl arriving at the home of the richer girl bearing a suitcase, the richer girl having an adulterous parent, the poorer girl having sex with a man, and the assumption of a male character by one of the girls during lovemaking with the other.)

Structurally, *Sister My Sister* invites comparison with *Howards End*. In addition to a Faustian bargain in which the sisters are allowed to work together but under stressful conditions, there are also elements of Cinderella, Achilles' heel, and the forbidden love of Tristan and Isolde. (An explanation for the deviation from an established pattern may be in order. In her *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, Kate L. Turabian writes, "The possessive case of . . . Greek [or hellenized] names of more than one syllable ending in *es*, is formed by adding an apostrophe alone.")

The screenplay for *Sister My Sister* was adapted by Wendy Kesselman from her play *My Sister in this House*, which won both the Susan Smith Blackburn Award and the Playbill Award for 1980. Kesselman also composed the song "Sleep My Little Sister, Sleep," which exhibits a certain resemblance to Fritz Kreisler's *Liebesleid*. If the film is correct, then Kesselman's play was written and performed while the woman on whom Lea is based was still alive.

Here again is a case where the laserdisc is not necessarily preferable to the VHS release. For one thing, this is a rare situation in which the only VHS version is letterboxed and the only laserdisc version is not, except for an 80-second portion of the titles. The latter approach is also employed on the DVD, or at least the reissue of May 2004. Since the original theatrical aspect ratio may well have been 1.66, the difference is not profound. The most obvious formatting casualty is a seed pearl that Lea tries to recover from under Madame's unyielding foot at an indicated elapsed time of 22 minutes and 40 seconds on the DVD. This bead should be visible well before Lea gets to it, which it is on VHS. This is not so on the laserdisc and DVD. Also, the resolution on the disc is lower than would be expected. It is as though the video transfer were done at 1.66 and that the laserdisc then used as its source not film elements but this letterboxed

video material, which had to be magnified in order to fill the screen. Such zooming-in would have lowered the overall resolution proportionally. Additionally, the DVD exhibits motion artifacts in the form of horizontal bands. Thus, one need not feel cheated for having viewed only the VHS tape.

The squalor of the pretitle scene stands in stark contrast to the Danzard household in which most of the remaining action takes place. Two girls have apparently been left to fend for themselves. They will come to be known as Christine and Lea. The sisters are portrayed in this scene by actresses who share a common last name and are, therefore, presumably, sisters themselves. It might have been interesting to see Joely Richardson partnered by her sister, actress Natasha Richardson. Christine acts as a surrogate mother to Lea. Christine washes Lea, anticipating the frenzied washing of hands and arms at the end. Lea plays with the same blanket with which she is seen later. Lea is fed by Christine. Lea will later accept candy from Isabelle. Lea dances around the room and will later run enthusiastically in the park. Christine brushes Lea's hair. This is retrospectively ironic because Christine will later feel betrayed when Lea brushes Isabelle's hair. The girls are separated and Christine considers the situation. As in *Heavenly Creatures*, psychological wounds at this age run deep. This separation is tolerated. How many more will be? How long can Christine maintain obedience and acquiescence before snapping?

The title is followed by a flashforward to the crime scene. When the film is seen a second time, it is realized that Christine's song heard here could actually be diegetic. The camera tracks backward down the stairs. As a framing device at the end of the film, it will pick up where it left off and track back up the stairs to reveal what is behind the maids' door. Note the flowers strewn on the stairs, the bloody banister, the bloody glove and the bloody tile floor. The curtain is being blown by wind. Jagged glass can be seen in the window frame, indicating that the window is broken. These various elements will be highlighted throughout the film.

In the expository caption, the town is not named. Kesselman specifies it as Le Mans for her play, and the photographer's business card will seem to confirm this, though the words are discernible only on film, not video. It is 1932, so one may take this as a *Heavenly Creatures* of the previous generation. Lea approaches the ominous black door, placing what is presumably her note containing the address and directions in her right pocket. Isabelle appears at the window, eager for any novelty in her dull life. The sisters enjoy a mutually welcome reunion.

Inside the house, the clock defiantly ticks away as everyone must wait for Madame Danzard. After hearing the terms of her employment, Lea puts the letter in her right pocket, as she will a later one. Lea is impressed with her stark and spartan room. Recalling the black-and-white title sequence, it is understood how even this is an improvement for her, though less than that achieved when Jane Eyre arrives at Thornfield. Even though this is a happy moment for Lea, it causes pity to be felt for her. As Christine closes the door, note her shaky hand on the handle. Getting permission from their mother for this arrangement required an economic excuse, and reference is made to Lea's inexperience. Christine changes the subject, saying that the room is cold.

Isabelle is not thrilled with having her nails polished by her mother. Her reaction will be quite different later when her hair is brushed by Lea. Christine demonstrates her perfectionism by arranging the rosaries. Lea's blanket gives Christine a vehicle for expressing contempt for her mother by way of the latter's "vulgar" sewing. When the blanket is associated with Lea instead of their mother, the blanket becomes acceptable to Christine. Lea is called "little cold feet,"

which recalls the reluctance of Chrysothemis discussed in a previous essay and which could also suggest frigidity in the sexual sense.

Madame acknowledges that she too has a financial incentive for this arrangement and remarks that there is “nothing like a convent girl.” The unintended meaning is that years of repression create a walking time bomb. Isabelle gives a sample of the sarcasm that will serve as one of her principal defense mechanisms.

As Lea serves the better-than-sex veal, Christine supervises Lea’s performance and then redirects her glance to observe Madame studying Lea with appraising eyes. This will prompt Christine to comment significantly, “She sees everything.” Lea is scared stiff and barely manages a staggering court’sy. At this point, Lea passes for merely nervous, giving no grounds to suspect what an emotional basket case she is.

The Danzards refer to their maids not by name but by relative age. (Also note how long it takes for either of the maids to refer to Isabelle by name.) They also remark on how quiet the maids are. In fact, the maids will save up for one catastrophic outburst. Isabelle shares a laugh with her mother, but only because it is her mother’s joke. Unlike the play, Madame speaks of her maids being “discreet” in Lea’s presence, as if the latter were absent or just part of the furniture. Madame speaks of having had a “prying maid” and that “these two are different.” Madame and Christine both speak of being “lucky.” The juxtaposition of parallel conversations solicits comparison between the pairs of women. Christine also admires Madame’s precision, a quality they share. Lea observes that Madame “doesn’t let us get away with a thing,” whereas Isabelle gets away with stealing candy.

The scene ends with Madame referring to the maids as “two pearls,” foreshadowing Isabelle’s work with seed pearls. Pearls represent beauty and incorruptible essence formed from the grit of suffering, just as coal, which will soon to be dragged in from the rain by the sisters, becomes diamond under the application of pressure. Among the things that pearls can represent are humility, a retiring nature, tears and the pearly gates. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pearls are said to “give light to the demon cities of the underworld, unrecognized, unconscious forces.”

A sample of the maids’ chores is offered. As the novice, Lea is more quickly exhausted, which is also consistent with the fact that her name probably derives from the Hebrew word for “weary.” Christine is such a perfectionist that she follows up on Lea’s polishing. Madame performs her white glove test and finds dirt but does not get mad. Perhaps Lea is being cut some slack because she is new. As she polishes the banister, Lea waves her fingers just prior to Christine touching them, as if to call the audience’s attention to the point of impending contact.

The sisters rise early from their shared bed. Christine claims to have put her past behind her, but she perhaps has only repressed it. She describes how fear induced a kind of paralysis that caused her to lead with her right foot when descending stairs in her convent school. The left-hand path is that of individualism and self-determination. The right-hand path is that of conformity and normality. The other girls used both their left and right feet together, demonstrating balance and harmony. It is as if Christine had been pathologically determined to deny her personal will and to demonstrate her obedience to orthodox authority. Christine’s talk of her right foot is juxtaposed with the revelation that the sisters have matching scars on their left arms. The blood and screaming of this shared experience seem to foreshadow the murder. They are not only “bound in blood,” but committed to the left-hand path. Their mother is said to have screamed at them. This is but a hint of the maternal rejection that Christine has suffered and that still awaits her.

The visitors' scrutiny of the maids supports Madame's later assertions about the danger of gossip and scandal. Again, typically, Madame scrutinizes Lea while Isabelle sulks. For the first time since Lea came to work for Madame, the sisters are seen away from the house as they enjoy their free time together in the park.

The rain would seem to represent a typical pathetic fallacy. Isabelle is certainly not a happy camper. Madame thinks Isabelle has "all the time in the world." In fact, it is later than she thinks. Like Tita facing years with her mother in *Like Water for Chocolate*, Isabelle is concerned with quality rather than quantity. Isabelle spills her seed pearls. As Lea cleans up, Christine observes from the stairs. As mentioned above, the laserdisc and DVD fail to show the seed pearl lying under Madame's shoe before Lea picks it up. Madame may not be expected to help in cleaning up the spill, but she will not even move her foot. It is not her place and not her problem. Meanwhile, Isabelle experiences the kind of boredom felt by Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men*.

There is a nice graphic match as a cut is made from Lea picking up beads to her picking up coins. The monster lurking within Christine begins to be revealed in the form of the resentment that she harbors towards her mother. The glare offered here by Joely Richardson would make her a good candidate for the part of Ada McGrath in *The Piano*. This glimpse into Christine's dark side would serve well as the end of the first of three acts.

As a champion of conformity and bourgeois decorum, Madame manages cheerfully to play "Laideronnette, impératrice des Pagodes" from Maurice Ravel's *Ma Mère l'Oye* within mechanically imposed temporal limits. Isabelle, however, is frustrated by the tyranny of the metronome. During this bit of chinoiserie, a woman walking a dog is seen through a window. This shot is one of at least two reminiscent of the pointillist paintings of Georges Seurat (1859-91), the other being a shot of the sisters seated with erect posture on a park bench some 41 minutes farther ahead in the film. The shot may function as a red herring if one assumes this woman is the person ringing the doorbell a few moments later. It appears, however, that the shot was artistically rather than textually motivated.

Lea places her letter in her right pocket while Madame's letter is served on a silver tray so that hands need not touch. Compare this to Christine touching Lea's hand as the latter polishes the banister ten minutes earlier in the film. Madame casts a disapproving eye on the partially concealed letter in Lea's pocket, but does not confront Lea. Madame earlier complained about "someone going through your things." She now perhaps begins to feel suspicion toward her "two pearls" of which she had been so proud. Madame is easily dumbfounded by the slightest abnormality, and considers the absence of a return address noteworthy. She predictably plays the role of Scrooge in reaction to the charitable appeal. The mention of "golden bowls" recalls *The Golden Bowl* by Henry James. "At least we don't have to go out," rationalizes Madame Danzard. But the dog-walking woman implies that rain is not a valid excuse for staying in. Nevertheless, Isabelle is trapped even more than the maids, who at least go shopping and visit their mother.

Christine tells Lea to read her letter aloud, which Lea does in the play. The film capitalizes on the opportunity to hear Christine read it with wonderful sarcasm. "You can't wear your hair like that, like a child, all that long hair." Long hair is given as the standard for a female child, and this in a society that is serious about standards. Isabelle looks like a child with respect to her clothes and her rather amorphous figure, but has short hair. She, therefore, resembles not merely a child but a boy. Christine reads that her mother wants her "to be gentle" as thunder is heard in the background. The sisters' mother is scared of Christine and a hint is given as to why

in an echo of the joke in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* when Dobbs asks Cody, “Who ain’t civilized?” and then slugs him.

After Christine gives just a hint of her anger, Lea erupts and Christine begins to realize the degree to which she has underestimated her sister’s psychological fragility. Christine takes responsibility, saying, “I am a monster, aren’t I?” As expressed in the Nathaniel Hawthorne quote in an earlier essay, this is not in itself an insight into Christine’s potential. Nor is it necessarily foreshadowing. Christine is horrified at the effect she is capable of having on Lea and tries to reconcile with her. This has been a valuable lesson for Christine that will determine her future behavior. Lea having called Christine’s face beautiful, Christine asks, “What’s beautiful about it?” Lea leaves the question unanswered, though in the play she replies, “Your eyes,” contributing to what will become an important motif.

A backlit hair-washing shot produces luminous baptismal imagery. This would not have been technically difficult to accomplish, but is still a lovely effect. Christine tells Lea that she should keep some money for herself. The break with the past is progressing, and the sisters’ independence is being asserted. Watching them leave, Isabelle envies them. She may also feel a longing of a different sort.

Isabelle sees her mother’s frivolity in an unguarded moment and hopes that her mother has lightened up to the point where her company is tolerable. It is not to be. Mama Elena in *Like Water for Chocolate* is a hypocrite who does not lack emotion, but is ashamed of it and represses it. Madame Danzard, who usually expresses emotions rather freely, dances to the music on the radio, but then denies her gaiety by retuning the radio, switching from Offenbach to a funereal, lugubrious Bach organ dirge rather than share her pleasure with Isabelle. Madame undertakes such sharing only when it is on her own terms and to her advantage, as in the card game, playing the piano, or celebrating Isabelle’s birthday. Isabelle continues to smile even after the station is changed and the candy goes into the cabinet. Either she is amused by the knowledge that her mother is capable of fun, or perhaps the taste of the candy overrides all else.

When the sisters return, an overhead cinematographic perspective without precedent in the film is employed. The high-angle viewpoint is continued as they ascend the stairs. This would seem to indicate a psychological change. Lea grabs her security blanket as the camera dollies to provide a cheat shot through the wall. Christine’s “some day, some day” again recalls *Of Mice and Men*. She says, “Lea, you can decide. Whatever you want, we’ll do.” Moments earlier, on the way up to their room, Lea had said, “We can never go back.” Now, on her initiative, the sisters pull apart the blanket that serves as a proxy for their mother, being an example of her “vulgar” sewing. (In the play, Lea bites the blanket, as Christine later bites thread.) They thus metaphorically sever apron strings, break with the past and declare their independence. After they fall onto the bed, Christine’s discomfort is reflected in the musical harmony.

Madame refers to her daughter and herself as “quite a pair” as the sisters are being discovered to be quite a pair themselves, yielding quite a pair of pairs. Lea is “still hungry all the time,” and not just for food. She searches for the right moment, while Christine nervously avoids eye contact. Again a simple but magical effect is achieved as fill light reflected from the white clothes falls on Lea’s face.

Ariadne’s thread allows Theseus to find his way out of the Labyrinth. But Christine, paralleling the earlier tearing of the blanket, now bites and breaks the thread with which she sews. Recalling the Fates, Clotho spins the thread of life, Lachesis draws it off the spindle, and Atropos cuts it. Similarly, the die is now cast and there is no turning back. This may in some way

be intended and desired. At the end of *Siegfried*, Brünnhilde and Siegfried sing, “Break, Norns, the runic rope.”

Christine gives Lea a white garment and voluntarily closes her eyes. Lea changes clothes and tells Christine when she can look. Christine exhales dramatically. It is now Lea who says that it is cold, as did Christine when Lea first arrived. A certain perilous threshold of intimacy was approached earlier. Now it is crossed. This still constitutes admirably gradual development for a film of such modest duration.

In the park the sisters communicate without words. Christine thinks, “What have I done? Can Lea forgive me?” She is reassured by Lea’s smile. Christine’s guilty conscience is further dealt with in church. She might be thinking, “Lea can forgive me, but can God?”

The cabinet is not an obstacle to Isabelle. She still manages to get her candy, and offers some to Lea. Is this a simple act of friendship and kindness? Is this a desperate, courageous gesture reaching out across class barriers? Is Isabelle starved for the affection and companionship that she cannot get from her mother? It is perhaps all of these. But could it also be a Lesbian overture? If not, then why does Isabelle, whose appearance was earlier analyzed as potentially masculine, not display a simple, friendly smile instead of that almost deadpan expression that could almost be read as “Come up and see me some time”? The transfer of the candy between the women is done with their left hands, recalling the sisters’ shared scar that is on their left arms. The left-hand path is alchemically symbolic of broken taboos, such as homosexuality and incest.

Prefiguring the chopping of Isabelle’s legs, Christine chops meat while Lea polishes the legs of a table. Isabelle plays the piano not with her mother but with a metronome that is every bit as rigid. Her efforts prove futile, but at least the metronome does not hold her hostage, as it is a constraining convention that can be ignored. The vase crashes and Lea panics. Objects tumble down the stairs as they will during the final catastrophe. Christine uses terms of endearment like those in her mother’s letter to Lea that so disgusted Christine when she read it. She now acts as a positive mother figure to Lea without sarcasm. Isabelle sees and perhaps infers enough to prompt her later question about “what else they’ve been doing.” Beyond mere suspicion, Isabelle could now be jealous and may view Christine as competition. A subsequent essay will examine a variation of this situation in *The Wings of the Dove*.

It may be Isabelle’s birthday, but, as when the questionnaire intended for Harold is answered by his mother in *Harold and Maude*, Madame is in charge and choreographs everything until she accidentally remembers whose birthday it is. In an earlier scene, when Isabelle is happy and lively music is being played on the radio, Madame changes the station. Now that Isabelle is somber, Madame sings along with the music as the photographer’s business card gives Christine an idea.

The male photographer is heard but not seen. Christine claims to be five years older than her sister, whereas she is six years older in the play. There is little room for filler in a film of less than 90 minutes. Therefore, one should feel free to interpret as an epigram any phrase that sounds as if it came out of a fortune cookie. “A sister sticks by you,” observes the insightfully apothegmatizing photographer, who appears to withdraw a darkslide twice for his second exposure. He tells the sisters that they do not have the appearance of servants. Madame will eventually make a similar observation. He solicits gossip, but gets none. The sisters are allowing their suppressed feelings to ferment fully, saving them for the end.

Madame directs the card game as she did Isabelle’s birthday party, practically playing both hands. The Danzards were initially satisfied with their maids and complimentary toward

them. Now they turn critical and gossiping. Though Madame asserts that the maids “don’t speak any more,” do they speak any less? The game is concurrent with a stretto of sexual pulsion, making the scene one of parallel *accelerandi* to parallel climaxes.

A transitional sequence provides a brief intermezzo. The maids’ room is empty, quiet and orderly. The sisters’ portrait, which rhymes with that of the Danzards from Isabelle’s birthday party, is displayed. This tranquility belies the fury that will soon emerge from behind their poker faces.

The first appearance of the dripping faucet, which will reappear intermittently during the remainder of the film, may be considered the start of the third act. The dripping echoes the fallaciously pathetic rain, portends tears, and may not be a particularly original cinematic device.

Isabelle dances as her mother had, snatches another piece of candy from the cabinet and mockingly imitates her mother’s white glove test. Instead of offering Lea candy, she offers her a hairbrush. Lea’s glance is in sync with the musical cadence, and this time she smiles. Christine observes from the stairs, as she did when Lea picked up the spilt seed pearls, and also mirroring Isabelle’s earlier observation of the sisters on the stairs. What would Christine have thought if she had seen the earlier incident with the candy?

If there is not meant to be a sexual undercurrent as Lea brushes Isabelle’s hair, then Isabelle seems to be enjoying herself a little too much. Isabelle’s behavior may reflect a starvation for amusement inherited from her mother, who enjoyed the card game to excess.

Christine becomes increasingly agitated, but is interrupted by the looming figure of Madame. Flight is still an option, so Christine withdraws. Isabelle’s reaction to her mother’s arrival suggests that fraternizing with the help is taboo. Madame, having earlier painted Isabelle’s fingernails, may resent Lea usurping her role. Prior to Madame picking it up, the wrapper on the sofa provides a good test for overscan by residing at the very bottom of the frame. Madame glares at Lea, who avoids eye contact. This rhymes with the close-ups of Isabelle and Lea during the scene in which the former offers the candy to the latter. Madame forces Lea to her knees and Christine unleashes her fury physically, but in the kitchen. This sublimation is about as close as housework ever comes in this film to the kind of ritual field that cooking represents in *Like Water for Chocolate*. When Madame enters the kitchen, setting a precedent, Christine also averts her eyes. Madame stops the dripping faucet, but she herself remains a wellspring of constant and mounting aggravation. As she leaves, the sound of her shoes triggers Christine’s flashback to Sister Veronica.

Wearing the pink sweater downstairs is an untypically bold stunt for Lea, and thus an instance of foregrounding. In a wonderful bit of foreshadowing, Madame says, “Do you think I’m blind?” Madame earlier spoke as if Lea were not present. Now it is Lea’s turn to ignore Madame, who again plays Scrooge, wondering if her maids are overpaid.

Lea submits an alternative candidate motto for this film when she explains, “I was only thinking of us.” Christine, the perfectionist, lists Lea’s mistakes, but then criticizes her perfect appearance. Christine feels not so much sexually based jealousy as separation anxiety. As if assuming Madame’s role, she echoes Madame’s recent statement, saying, “I have eyes. I can see,” and then echoes Madame’s earlier opinion, saying, “You’re different. Believe me. I know.” Lea is prompted to demonstrate her devotion on the spot, which, being the kitchen, makes for the taking of unprecedented risk. As Madame will later say, “They’re getting careless.” Christine again exhales prior to engaging her sister physically.

Madame, at least for the time being, can still say, "Now I see." She recognizes the potential for scandal, but Isabelle underestimates it, saying, "You go too far." It will be by going too far in another sense that Madame precipitates the climactic crime. Madame ends with, "You haven't lived here nearly long enough." The maids will rebut this most assertively.

As Isabelle endures her fitting, the pins can be seen as a diminutive crucifixion symbol like Barton Fink's thumbtacks, especially as Isabelle stands with her arms slightly raised in pitiful imitation of a posture which would foreshadow crucifixion, as in *Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist* by Adolphe-William Bouguereau or *The Shadow of Death* by William Holman Hunt. But Isabelle is worthy only to be a mere material victim, not a proper sacrifice, so Madame says, "Oh, put your arm down, Isabelle." Thus, Isabelle's assumption of this pose constitutes hubris that will be punished. Adding to the irony is the presence of a character named Christine, which can be taken as an adjective of which Isabelle is not deserving. The third act has certainly begun by now, if it has not already.

Foreshadowing the climax, the maids are blamed for a faulty iron, Christine is "like water for chocolate" and Madame does not know when to quit. Lea smiles and spills the pins, echoing Isabelle's spilling of the seed pearls. Lea again cleans up, now joined by Christine. When Madame says, "Next time we'll go to the dressmaker's," Christine almost loses it on the stairs, seemingly prepared to suggest a more infernal destination. But, like Aida in her confrontation with her rival Amneris, she controls herself, this time. Instead of confronting Madame, the spring is just wound up even tighter (*ut tensio, sic vis*).

Christine clearly has issues with both the Danzards, saying, "She sees things, things that aren't even there; Her and her daughter." Lea seems to be in metaphysical denial when she says, "There is no other world." To Lea, the angrily yelling Christine sounds like Maman, whom Lea earlier defended. Perhaps monstrosity is hereditary, but the role of negative mother figure will ultimately be left to Madame. Various implication suggest themselves when Lea says of Isabelle, "She may never get married." Just as Isabelle is a poor substitute for Christ, it may be ironic that she wears a dress the hem of which the sisters agree is "perfectly straight." Madame has ironically stated that Isabelle has "all the time in the world." Christine now tells Lea, "You're all I'll ever have. . . . There'll never be enough time for us." Madame is too ignorant to be in denial, while the prescient Christine is wiser than she knows.

Lea earlier initiated the tearing of the blanket. Now, after Christine's story about Sister Veronica, she insightfully says, "Christine. Let's pretend I'm her." This sentiment proves to be generally applicable throughout the film as the various characters reciprocally carry each other's projections and commandeer each other's words and actions. Once again, Lea is given a white garment by Christine and then changes clothes while Christine's eyes are closed. This time, Lea is in control and so tells Christine to close her eyes in addition to telling her when to open them. (In the play, it is Lea who is reminded of Sister Veronica by Christine's walking, and the dialogue is reversed.)

The specter of Sister Veronica contributes ambiguity to the film's title. Symbols converge and conflate as Christine's biological sister assumes the appearance of Sister Veronica. Madame and Maman will similarly merge. Crossfading to the sisters in bed together suggests continuity of their role playing. This juxtaposes and connects sister Veronica with sexual activity, suggesting that the nun may represent more than simply another disappointing, abandoning maternal surrogate. There is another display of the sisters' scars, or as they say, the one scar that they share. They are then seen again sitting in the park, this shot being the one alluded to earlier that suggests the art of George Seurat.

The sisters come home from church in their white gloves, echoing Madame's white glove test. "They don't even look like maids anymore" because they have adopted one of the symbols of Madame's class, and perhaps are dressing above their station and encroaching on Madame's territory. "It's as if they never sleep," observes Madame, which some find comical. But the maids are now being impacted by both spatial and temporal constraints. As there will "never be enough time," they must make time. As easily astonished as ever, Madame says, "They're getting careless."

Lea's nightmare serves as a Rorschach test for the audience, some of whom assume sexual activity. Lea's phrase "corner to corner" anticipates the sisters feeling themselves cornered at the end. "Just this last little corner" is a phrase used by Madame when painting her daughter's fingernails. The desperate sisters will come to feel themselves confined to an analogously small area. Lea equivocated when Christine asked that she never leave. Now it is Lea who asks for a promise of solidarity. Madame checks the silverware. According to Christine, "It's better that way."

The dripping faucet now seems to be counting down. *Tempus fugit*. When a door blows open in the first act of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, Siegmund says that spring has entered. As the Danzards' window blows open, it may be the Furies who have arrived. Christine traps them inside by closing the window. She turns off the dripping faucet, as Madame had earlier. In order to secure a rhyme with the earlier mishap with the vase, Lea is again situated upstairs, this time ironing, while Christine takes up her position in the kitchen. Christine, who earlier listed mistakes that Lea made due to distraction, now, while cleaning a glass, breaks it and cuts herself. As Madame says, she is "getting careless." She puts her hand to her mouth, possibly removing a shard of glass, and possibly tasting her blood. Tasting a dragon's blood transformed Siegfried's consciousness. The look on Christine's face suggests that the experience may have made her blood-thirsty. Like the slow dripping of the faucet, only a small quantity of blood is involved at this point. But both are about to gush. In childhood, the sisters were scarred simultaneously. Christine's mishap may be the start of a new shared wound.

As if triggered by Christine's tasting of her blood, a spark like the alchemical scintilla of divine power bursts forth from the already notorious iron. Reinforcing the rhyme, Lea comes down to the landing where she had earlier upset the vase and is again comforted by Christine. "I was in the middle of the satin blouse," says Lea, the middle representing the still point transcendent of desire and fear. As emphasized in the previous essay, this is the desired situation. Christine recognizes her sister's potential to explode, which she tactically defuses, saying, "How can Madame be angry?" She also knows full well that it is a stupid question. Madame has previously been angry about various things and the iron has already been repaired twice, but at least the maids have not yet been threatened with dismissal. Of course, if Madame had a clue, then all could live happily ever after.

After inspecting the damage, Christine emerges from the room with the terrible and ironic calm that Othello can muster when necessary. She seems to realize that this is merely the calm before the storm. She lies to soothe Lea, walking on eggshells to keep her sister from self-destructing. To Lea's question "What will happen now?" Christine replies, "Nothing will happen." Nothing metaphysical may happen, but remember from the *Heavenly Creatures* essay that when the lion lies down with the lamb it does not mean that the lion is not going to eat the lamb. Yet, one must look beyond the physical fact that "people die every day."

As to how much money they have saved, Christine says, "Not enough," with, for her, a novel inclined posture, as a dog is heard in the background (see the essay on *Barton Fink*). As in

Of Mice and Men, the sisters' plan to save their money and move away to a simple, idyllic future together is being thwarted. (An alternative subtitle for this essay could be *Of Mice and Women*.) Christine's "rest" ominously suggests that someone may be about to Rest In Peace. Christine again acts in a loving, motherly fashion. The burnt blouse, which is now revealed, spawns graver consequences than the one in *Like Water for Chocolate*.

Crosscutting between the Danzards and their maids again establishes closely juxtaposed, matching dialogue. The film is bracketed by such sequences. During the early "veal" scene, this implies some sort of parallelism. The lines of action then diverge, distort, and now converge in an antiparallel, ironic manner in the moments leading up to the murder. Christine says "Listen." Moments later, Madame says the same. Charting a collision course, Madame says, "I'm going up there at once," while Christine says, "I have to go down." Lea says, "Wait." With knowing urgency, Isabelle says, "Maman, wait. I don't think you should." Isabelle seems to sense the danger posed by the maids and fears for her mother. At some point, she could have recognized her mother as the problem and feared for maids. But now that she realizes that she probably cannot compete with Christine for Lea, she will soon join her mother in harassing Christine. Isabelle eventually follows Madame up the stairs, as Lea will eventually follow Christine down them. It was Christine who was worried about Lea leaving. Lea now expresses their mutual and foremost concern when she begs, "Don't leave me."

Christine reverts to her childhood practice of leading with her right foot while descending stairs. This, like her reference to her "perfectly straight" hem, is a denial of the nature of her relationship with her sister. Her disheveled appearance is one of several instances of foregrounding in these final minutes and echoes the mad scenes in various *bel canto* operas, like *La Sonambula* or *Lucia de Lammermoor*. It also recalls *The Mad Woman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar. She carries a candle. Strauss's Elektra lights the way for Aegisthus on the way to his slaughter. Paralysing fear puts Christine at a decided disadvantage in her first genuine (and confrontational) conversation with Madame. In spite of this, she desperately struggles to postpone that which Madame makes inevitable. Madame initially withdraws down the stairs, but then, sensing her advantage, she advances upwards, on the offensive.

The opportunity has been taken to craft a smoother, steadier final crescendo to the climax, relative to Kesselman's prototype. Isabelle asks, "Who knows what else they've been doing?" Does Isabelle? In Christine's state, it probably matters no more than it does for the paranoid Captain Queeg. Confronted with the potential revelation of both the burned blouse and her extracurricular activities, Christine imposes the most extreme subjective interpretation on this interrogation. As noted earlier, Isabelle could also be opportunistically accusatory due to jealousy.

Director of photography Ashley Rowe's directional lighting now functions as literal cinematographic foreshadowing. First one and then both Madame's eyes appear as empty sockets. In real time, the effect amplifies Madame's *mal occhio*. Having just told Madame that she "can't see my sister now," Christine then tells the woman who "sees everything" that she "has seen nothing." This may be true in a sense, but in another, Christine knows better and is in denial. Any such denial is overridden when Madame dashes Christine's hopes of secrecy and Christine begs her to stop. Also recall that the essay on *The Crying Game* offers possibly applicable alternative meanings for the word *nothing*. Madame calls Christine "mad," emphasizing this situation's aforementioned similarity to an operatic mad scene.

Foregrounding occurs when Madame addresses Christine by name for the first time. This facilitates the transference and focusing of all Christine's hostility in the direction of one target to

whom all guilt is delegated. A photograph of a mother and daughter inspires Christine to be photographed with her sister. Lea says that Christine sounds like Maman. Lea impersonates Sister Veronica for Christine. In the physical absence of a biological mother, the sisters have carried each other's archetypal projections. They eventually absolve each other and direct all their hatred of maternal dominance to a Madame, who serves as the physically available surrogate on whom all vengeance and reprisal will fall. Even if Christine is not with the one that she hates, she hates the one that she is with. In *Howards End* and *Like Water for Chocolate*, the distinction is made between the biological and the mystical parent. Here, they become conflated into Madame, who, in her role as the monstrous antimother, will pay for her own sins as well as those of all who have troubled Christine.

To a certain degree, Christine, Lea and Madame enact the respective roles of Electra, Chrysothemis and Clytemnestra. The confined and domineered Isabelle is like an already-sacrificed Iphigenia. This may also be regarded as an anti-Cinderella story, with Christine and Lea as servile protagonists, Isabelle as the one bad sister, and at least two and possibly three bad mothers: the maids' biological one, Madame and Sister Veronica.

There are times when the last straw can be recognized without having to wait for the camel's back to break. Lea arrives and Madame issues the ultimate threat, telling Christine that she will "never work with her again." This is all that one should need to hear in order to say, "Excuse me. I have to run for my life now." Christine has already lost one "sister" (Veronica), and refuses to let it happen again.

Christine is carrying the psychological baggage of all four principal characters. Juggling these diverse neuroses ultimately proves an intolerable burden. Even if catastrophe is not inevitable, Madame, with her unremitting goading, cannot leave well enough alone. At pains to resist Madame's unabating provocation, Christine is progressively borne in on. Considering her emotional handicap, Christine exhibits admirable if not heroic self-restraint and does laudably well to postpone violence as long as she does before finally snapping under the unrelieved strain.

Madame's "dirt, scum" recalls Mr. Robinson in *The Graduate*. At the end of her strength and pushed beyond all endurance, Christine reaches the breaking point. Christine focuses her attack on Madame's eyes. This ties together the numerous references to eyes, seeing and blindness, any one of which could serve as an alternate motto. It will be recalled that a similar anatomical preoccupation pervades *Barton Fink*. The emotional dam having burst, the kitchen reflects this by being the site not of a drip but a torrent. A dog is again heard.

Surveys of the crime scene bookend the film. In a reversal of the flashforward in the title sequence, the camera now ascends the stairs. Like the photographer earlier, the owner of the male voice remains unseen and disembodied. He asks, "Was it simply sisterly love?" Simply? No. Ultimately? Yes. At the end of *Heavenly Creatures*, Pauline is lost in the abyss, at least psychologically, but with implied hope. Christine in a sense outdoes Pauline by undergoing physical deterioration and death.

As in *Howards End*, many paired, rhyming elements assert themselves and invite scrutiny:

- Both Madame and the photographer call the maids "discreet."
- Madame calls the maids "pearls" and Isabelle works with seed pearls.
- Twice Isabelle works on her beaded bag and twice she plays the piano with the metronome going.

- Isabelle spills seed pearls and Lea spills pins. Lea participates in cleaning up both spills.
- Twice the vase on the landing is upset and its flowers spilled.
- Twice Christine yells at Lea while the latter is sitting on their bed and the former paces the floor.
- Twice Christine exhales when aroused by Lea.
- The music that Isabelle plays on the piano just after she gives Lea the chocolate appears to be a slower version of the tune that accompanies Isabelle as she offers the brush to Lea.
- The Danzards appear together in a photograph and so do the maids.
- The photographer says that no one would know that the sisters were servants. Madame says that the sisters do not look like maids anymore.
- Christine complains to Lea, “You never stick up for me.” The epigrammatic photographer comments, “A sister sticks by you.”
- Madame says that the maids “don’t speak any more.” Christine says, “Madame never speaks to us any more.”
- Christine’s stockings are removed lovingly. Isabelle’s are later pulled down in anger.
- Twice Lea is given a white garment by Christine and then changes clothes while Christine’s eyes are closed, eventually telling Christine when to open them.
- Twice the maids are blamed for a faulty iron.
- Both Madame and Christine turn off the dripping faucet.
- Lea repeatedly places objects into her right pocket, including a piece of paper as she first approaches the Danzard home, her letter of introduction after it is read by Madame, the letter from her mother and (twice) the chocolate from Isabelle.
- Isabelle’s nails are polished by her mother, and then her hair is brushed by Lea.
- Twice Christine observes Lea from the stairs. Christine is observed on the stairs with Lea by Isabelle.
- Madame describes her maids as “different.” Christine tells Lea, “You’re different.”

These rhymes are supplemented by many repeated words, including *cold*, *hungry*, *different*, *lucky*, *listen* and *wait*. The numerous references to eyes and vision have already been noted, as has the rhyming nature of certain material in the pretitle sequence. Much of this rhyming is to be found in the play from which the film is derived:

- In scene 1, Christine says, “The room’s cold.” In scene 6, Lea says, “I’m cold.”
- In scene 3, Christine says of Madame, “She sees everything.” In scene 12, Christine says, “She sees things. Things that aren’t even there. Her and her daughter.” In scene 14, Christine finally says, “Madame has seen nothing.”
- In scene 3, Madame tells Isabelle, “You have all the time in the world.” In scene 12, Christine tells Lea, “There’ll never be enough time for us.”
- In scene 3, Lea’s letter from her mother, which is read by Lea rather than Christine, reads, in part, “Lea, my pet, my little dove.” In scene 14, Christine addresses Lea as, “My angel. My love.”
- In scene 4, Madame performs her white glove test. In scene 11, Isabelle parodies her mother’s white glove test. In scene 13, Madame comments on the maids’ white gloves.
- In scene 6, Christine tells Lea, “I’ll close my eyes.” In scene 12, Lea tells Christine, “Close your eyes.”

- In scene 7, Isabelle eats a chocolate and then offers one to Lea. In scene 11, Isabelle eats a chocolate and then offers a hairbrush to Lea.
- In scene 7, Lea causes a pitcher to fall and calls, “Christine!” In scene 14, Lea burns a blouse and calls “Christine!”
- In scene 8, An unseen male photographer asks of Lea, “Cat got her tongue?” In scene 15, An unseen male judge says, “Speak!”

Occasionally, a rhyming set in the play has only one of its components persisting in the film:

- In scene 6, and in the film, Christine says, “You’re still hungry all the time.” In scene 1 of the play, Lea also says, “I’m hungry all the time.”
- In scene 8, and in the film, at the photographer’s, Christine tells Lea not to be slow. In scene 9 of the play, Madame also says, “Oh, Isabelle, sometimes you’re so slow.”
- In scene 14, and in the film, Christine says, “Madame has seen nothing.” Madame replies, “Nothing?” In scene 9 of the play, additionally, Isabelle says, “Nothing was happening.” Madame replies, “Nothing?”
- In scene 12, and in the film, Lea says, “I didn’t smile–.” In scene 9 of the play, Isabelle also says, “I wasn’t smiling, Maman.”

The comparisons that have been solicited seem to invite the conclusion that all four principals are victims but also simultaneously share the guilt. Objectively, Madame may be no more than a petty tyrant and Isabelle may not be particularly culpable. But the sisters are emotionally crippled as well as literally scarred. If Christine seems “mad,” then at least she comes by it honestly, experiencing triple maternal rejection by her biological mother, Sister Veronica and Madame Danzard, respectively. The third time is the charm. Madame is a victim of class consciousness, which compels her to uphold the standards and conventions of her caste by denouncing her maids. Whether or not she deserves everything she gets, she at least is a *provocatrice* who asks for it, and so is no more innocent than a bull fighter.

In the film *Murderous Maids* (*Les Blessures Assassines*) of Jean-Pierre Denis, based on the same story, there is an additional sister, who is raped by her father and becomes a nun, thus augmenting the Electral aspect, since, depending on the teller of the story, Iphigenia is either sacrificed by Agamemnon or rescued by Artemis and becomes priestess. The mother is ironically named Clémence and there is a pseudostepfather analogous to Aegisthus. Moments before her murder, the mistress says, “I’ve been blind for too long.” A postscript claims that Léa was alive at the time the film was produced (2000).