

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

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Abstract

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

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