Title of Paper: Pricing Parenthood: the Maternal Body as Commodity in George Moore's Esther Waters

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Abstract:

This essay analyzes George Moore's Esther Waters to illustrate how the commodification of the working-class maternal body in the wet-nursing and baby-farming industries silences the wet-nurse's personhood as mother in favor of her commodity value as a supplier of breast milk. The very liminality of the wet-nurse's position embodies a slippage between the concepts of the working mother and motherhood as work. Employed by and living in another family's home to perform the paid labor of maternal service, the wet-nurse strains the boundaries of the working and domestic spheres. While scholars have sometimes compared Esther's plight as an unwed, single mother to that of similar figures in late-Victorian fiction like Hardy's Tess, this essay argues that Moore distinguishes Esther's story from that of the typical servant girl turned fallen woman by employing his heroine as the mouthpiece through which to give voice to the single, working-class mother's struggle to prove her value as an individual woman beyond that of the labor she provides.

Keywords: George Moore; Esther Waters; motherhood; childbirth; fallen woman; wet-nursing; baby-farms; child-neglect; infanticide; infant mortality

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In a study of childbirth and child-rearing practices in the British aristocracy during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Judith Schneid Lewis writes that "childbearing would seem to fall equally on women of all classes. If indeed there is such an entity as women's history, then childbearing must be a unifying theme" (1). Yet it comes as little surprise that the maternal experience and ideas about motherhood during this period were largely dictated by women's class distinction. Aside from the fact that middle and upper-class mothers traditionally had greater access to sufficient medical care, as the doctrine of separate spheres established more clearly delineated boundaries between work and domesticity during the latter half of the century that sentimentalized family life, there emerged a persistent notion that child-rearing more than mere child-bearing constituted fulfilling the duties of motherhood. If child-rearing occurred in the home, the idea of the working-class mother leaving her home to perform paid labor seemed incongruous with the domestic ideal of woman as mother, not least because it often required placing her children under the care of other women—the so-called "baby farmers" that emerged to fulfill this necessity. Even if the children of middle and upper-class families were often cared for by servants or governesses, they nonetheless remained within the sanctity of the home—the presumed sacred space best suited to their upbringing. Moreover, as Emma Lynn Liggins observes in her study of working-class mothers in the fiction of the 1890s, the trend toward women's inclusion in the workforce during the latter half of the century and concerns about the decreasing birthrate "precipitated a moral panic about woman's ambivalent attitudes to childbearing and the responsibilities it entailed" (17). Such ambivalence on women's part points to a pull between the respective economic and social pressures of choosing between two seemingly one-dimensional identities: mother or working woman.

This schism, I suggest, defines motherhood not as a universal female experience, but rather as a position of privilege; that is, the socioeconomic luxury of being able to "own" a child. Viviana A. Zelizer's study of the social and economic value of children in the nineteenth century can offer useful insight into this idea of the child as luxury object; exploring the market versus intangible value of the child based on a family's socioeconomic status, Zelizer distinguishes between what she terms the child as "object of sentiment" versus "object of utility" (7). She ascribes the term "object of sentiment" to the middle or upper-class child, sheltered and well-cared for within the confines of home or school. Conversely, the child as "object of utility" refers to the child as wage-earner in the working-class family. Liggins's work speaks directly to this construct of measuring child value in socioeconomic terms, for she argues that working women's children were "threatened by [their mothers'] lack of financial resources, not by their lack of natural, maternal love" and that the images of dead babies that frequented late-nineteenth century fiction "reflect[ed] contemporary concerns about working mothers and the costs of bringing up children" (17). This construct of the child as costly possession casts motherhood not so much as a service to the public, but as an economic investment.
Nowhere does this commodification of the parent-child relationship show itself more clearly than in the fictional representation of the wet-nurse, whose story addresses the paradoxical exchange of selling one’s services as mother to support herself and, often, her own children. Moreover, the child, merely through his birth that enables his mother to market herself as a wet-nurse, unwittingly becomes both the root of her financial difficulties and the source of her income. George Moore’s novel *Esther Waters* (1894)—the story of a working-class, single mother—interrogates this commodification of mother and child and the implications such a construct held for the social value of motherhood. This essay analyzes Moore’s novel to illustrate how viewing the working-class mother exclusively in terms of her commodity value threatens the erasure of the wet-nurse’s identity as mother in her own right. The very liminality of the wet-nurse’s position embodies a kind of slippage between the ideas of the working mother and motherhood as work. Employed by and taking up residence within another family to perform the paid labor of maternal service, the wet-nurse strains the boundaries between the working and domestic spheres. Scholars like Siobhan Chapman and Annette Federico read *Esther Waters* as a story of female narrative agency; for Federico, Esther’s story offers “a way to claim the rights of an individual woman to make choices, to affirm the validity of her own experiences” (115). Such a reading of the novel speaks directly to a discussion of the wet-nurse’s struggle to validate her own maternal identity, for it situates Esther’s story firmly within concerns respecting women’s understanding of and attitudes toward the working mother and motherhood as work at the end of the century.

Drawing upon Chapman’s and Federico’s readings, I examine how the social prejudice Esther Faces as an unwed mother and her struggle to defy the opinion that she should abandon her illegitimate child give voice to the wet-nurse’s struggle to create a maternal identity of her own. Seduced and subsequently abandoned by William Latch—a fellow servant at the home of the Barfields where Esther works as a kitchen-maid—Esther might not initially intend or anticipate her maternity; yet even as William’s seduction seemingly inflicts a maternal narrative upon Esther, she recognizes that agency over the outcome of this bodily narrative—that is, the decision to accept a maternal identity by keeping and raising her son—remains with her. Set against the backdrop of an understanding of motherhood in which child-bearing in and of itself does not constitute the fulfillment of that role, Moore’s novel suggests that the maternal narrative is one in which a woman chooses to make a long-term, even life-long investment in the creation of another human life.

Published in 1894, *Esther Waters* followed significant investigation and legislation protecting infants against wide-spread infanticide and the practice of baby-farming by more than twenty years. Yet Moore depicts a society in which

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1 In 1872, the Infant Life Protection Act responded to reports of wide-spread infanticide by requiring the registration of all baby-farming establishments. The baby-farm was established to take in—for a small fee—infants whose mothers had to work to provide for them and could not care for them at
child neglect remains a pressing concern, serving as the lens through which he examines the problem of undermining the individual value of the working-class mother and child in favor of their economic utility. The story of Esther’s seduction, abandonment by her lover, and subsequent struggle to survive is unremarkable in and of itself; indeed, scholars have sometimes compared her plight to that of similar figures in late-Victorian fiction such as Thomas Hardy’s Tess. Yet Moore distinguishes Esther’s story from that of the typical servant-girl turned fallen woman by utilizing her as the mouthpiece through which to give voice to the single, working-class mother’s struggle to prove her value as an individual beyond that of the labor she provides. Moore undertakes this examination through his criticism of the wet-nursing and baby-farming systems that problematize the working woman’s self-identification as mother by pressing her into maternal service while simultaneously undermining her maternal experience.

If Esther’s story works to shed light on the life of the servant, and if motherhood constitutes a form of service—to the family and to the nation at large—we cannot read her story without considering it within the light of her maternal experiences. Yet as she markets herself as a wet-nurse and the milk she produces becomes commodified, the callous disregard that those who seek her services show her and her son Jacky denies her a maternal identity through their refusal to acknowledge the necessary maternal transformation she has undergone to work as a wet-nurse. As both a working-class woman and one who has had a child out of wedlock, Esther has not entered into motherhood through the so-called legitimate, socially sanctioned channel of marriage, and she is thus denied the right to construct a maternal narrative for herself. Through Esther’s struggle to defy the criticism she faces by choosing to raise her son on her own, Moore offers a story that challenges the societal perception of working-class and so-called illicit motherhood as valueless.

Molly Youngkin argues that ”Esther is a successful heroine precisely because she speaks out in the same way that real-life women were speaking out in the 1890s” (125). If the cult of domesticity revered motherhood as a means of attaching greater respectability to the work of home and hearth, the emergence of the ”New Woman” in the latter half of the century called for a reconceptualization of motherhood as a single aspect of rather than the entirety of woman’s work that acknowledged its contribution to society without retaining the one-dimensionality of the role. As feminist novelist and essayist Mona Caird wrote at the end of the century, “we shall never have really good mothers until women cease to make motherhood the central idea of their existence” (QTD in Richardson 210). Caird’s statement, I suggest, far from outright rejecting motherhood, claims that women would make better mothers if, rather than

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home. Since infants placed in such establishments were frequently subject to neglect, baby-farms became notorious for offering working-class women a convenient means of disposing of unwanted and often illegitimate children.
submitting to a socially prescribed role, they were given a choice as to whether or not to pursue that role. Through Esther's story, Moore positions choice and the inclination toward motherhood, not economic means, as key in the success of child-rearing. True, Esther’s determination to raise Jacky to self-sufficient manhood defines successful mothering in terms of the ability to produce future citizens who make their way in the world by contributing labor to society. Yet it is the emotional value she places on Jacky as an individual rather than a consumer of her resources that motivates her strong work ethic.

While Moore criticizes viewing the working-class child as an economic burden, he likewise illustrates that the overindulgent treatment of the upper-class child can prove equally detrimental to the child's potential growth. His description of Esther’s mistress Mrs. Barfield’s preoccupation with gardening offers a caveat against this doting, overly sentimental mothering; Mrs. Barfield is depicted "trot[ting] to and fro from her greenhouse to her potting-shed, watering, pruning, and syringing her plants. These plants were dearer to her than all things except her children; she seemed, indeed, to think of them as if they were children...[S]he would sit freeving them from devouring insects all the day long” (Moore IV). Here Moore invokes the trope of the flower garden not as a symbol of the nurturing mother, but rather of the rich and idle mother whose children serve as a pet amusement to occupy her time. As the over-watered plant dies, so too the spoiled child comes to ruin—a result Moore illustrates with the fate of the Barfield children at the novel’s end, which I will address in greater detail later in the essay.

Esther Waters, then, offers a critical indictment of doting, upper-class motherhood and upper-class attitudes toward the struggles of the working-class, single mother. Liggins’s work cites the many instances of working mothers who, in the face of social prejudice and financial hardship, chose to take their own lives along with those of their infants—an act that she argues signifies their inability to "conceive of a life without maternal roles, or alternatively their attempts to rescue the family from poverty" (17). Esther in fact contemplates such a possibility shortly after leaving the wet-nursing position that both enables her to provide for her son and prevents her giving him the care he requires: "[S]he rested her burden on the parapet of a bridge, and saw the London night, vast water rolling, and the spectacle of the stars like a dream from which she could not disentangle her individuality. Was she to die in the star-lit city, her and her child?” (Moore XIV). Standing on the parapet of the bridge, trapped between the prospects of death and the workhouse, the defining moment of Esther’s narrative comes in the struggle to "disentangle her individuality”—to detach herself from the sea of nameless mothers who chose death for themselves and their children. Contemplating her own death and her son’s as one, Esther seemingly cannot disentangle the notion of herself as woman from that of herself as mother—or rather, she chooses not to do so. She thus "disentangles her individuality" from the fates of countless other working-class mothers in her choice of a lived maternal experience.
Moore sets up the notion of motherhood as choice by placing Esther's moment of self-realization at the point of her potential death. To die, to become yet another anonymous dead mother and child would result in the death of the maternal narrative—an untold story that perpetuates rather than challenges the societal perception of the single, working-class mother and child as valueless. If those mothers who chose death over an impossible motherhood chose to end their children's lives in unison, that choice enacted a final attempt to gain control over the outcome of their narratives. To end their children's lives, more than denying them any future existence (whether rich or Poor), prevented the possibility of another woman stepping in to claim the maternal narrative they themselves could not fulfill; thus explains Esther's outrage when the baby-farmer Mrs. Spires encourages Esther to pay her to find an adoptive mother for Jacky. While Mrs. Spires's offer to "take the child off yer 'ands" is a euphemism for allowing him to die of neglect, within the context of Esther's maternal narrative, whether Jacky dies or is adopted, either outcome would effectively erase her maternal identity. The idea that motherhood could be thus commodified—that Esther would effectively sell her maternal identity to Mrs. Spires—situates the working-class mother within an economic market that strips her motherhood of any sentimental value.

While increased medical intervention in childbirth and childcare practices during the middle and late nineteenth century endeavored to address concerns about the market that sprang up around infanticide and child neglect through the baby-farming industry, such intervention also drew a clear distinction in child and maternal value based on class status. The treatment of the wet-nurse, as I argue throughout this essay, epitomized this distinction, but the quality of medical care to which the working-class mother had access also points to a discrepancy in the social investment in the working-class mother's child compared with the middle and upper-class mother's child. This discrepancy showed itself plainly in the lying-in hospital for poor and destitute women with its limited supplies, poor sanitation, and high infant and maternal mortality rates. Giving birth at home—a privilege typically reserved for the middle or upper-class woman—granted her a greater degree of agency over childbirth than she might receive in the lying-in hospital, where the charity given her was offered in exchange for her body being put to service for medical study. In the privacy of her home and surrounded by female relatives, the mother was arguably less subject to the scientific scrutiny of the male medical gaze. Such was

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2 The increasing medical intervention in childbirth and childcare practices during the latter half of the century with the rise of the male obstetrician triggered an increase in physicians' endeavors to raise public awareness about infant and childcare. In a study of abortion and infanticide in England in the nineteenth century, Rodger Sauer notes that amid the formation of groups like the Ladies Sanitary Association and the Infant Preservation Society, medical publications like the British Medical Journal frequently featured calls for legislation that would result in better infant and child care, the most notable of which being the Infant Life Protection Act previously mentioned (91).
not the luxury of the woman forced to seek the services of the charity hospital where, Moore suggests, her status as fallen woman together with her poverty and inability to pay for her medical care took precedence over her human dignity and that of her child.

I do not suggest that novels like Esther Waters discounted the importance of such practical study to advance the medical understanding of obstetrics; rather, I argue that Moore seeks to expose the dehumanization to which the women who received such care were subjected. Indeed, the work of advocates for improved maternal care often addressed the stigma of giving birth under such conditions; Florence Nightingale famously proclaimed in Introductory Notes on Lying-in Institutions that children born in such establishments "appear to be admitted to life and to hospital together, as if life were synonymous with disease" (64). On the one hand, Amanda Carson Banks notes in her study of childbirth practices in the nineteenth century that the classification of childbirth as pathological arose largely from the fact that medical students typically received their obstetric training in the lying-in hospital where, due to unsuitable conditions and inadequate access to care throughout a woman's pregnancy, cases were often more severe (80). Yet as Moore illustrates, for the working-class, single mother, the pathologization of childbirth was as much concerned with sexual as with physical pathology. The illegitimate child, far from being the result of a so-called socially and morally sanctioned union, was perceived as the progeny of sexual deviance and thus inherently diseased. As Tess O'Toole argues in her examination of the servant's body in Esther Waters, the refusal Esther encounters in her endeavor to seek aid before her confinement serves as an attempt "to safeguard the institutions her body might enter, be they charity hospitals or the family" (329). Through Moore's depiction of Esther's experience giving birth in the charity hospital, he creates a story that seeks to legitimate the value of the unwed mother's maternal experience. I argue that he employs the childbirth scene—and specifically Esther's experience under the influence of obstetric anesthesia—to underscore the single mother's struggle to legitimate her maternal identity.

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3 Women who sought admittance to charity hospitals typically applied to subscribers (or donors) who were issued tickets or letters that they gave to women in need. Hospitals generally kept lists of subscribers to whom women could apply. When Esther approaches several subscribers, they turn her away because of her position as an unwed mother; as one subscriber explains, "[I]t was her invariable custom to only give letters to married women" (Moore XV).

4 It is worth noting that the necessity of altering the birthing posture from a seated position to a recumbent one largely contributed to the pathological treatment of childbirth that problematized the mother's active participation in the process; not only was the recumbent position on a bed or couch perceived as "the posture of ill health," but administering drugs that often produced absolute insensibility removed the woman from her own body and from a process in which she ought to have been the principle participant (Banks 87).
Michelle Boulous Walker's philosophical study of the ways that masculinist hegemonic discourse can silence the maternal narrative speaks to my reading of Esther Waters as a novel that gives voice to that narrative, specifically within the context of Esther's endeavor to gain control over the birthing process. Walker argues that "if women are located outside a privileged domain, they do not have the opportunity to speak inside it...[S]ilence and voice are differentiated each according to their status as either inside or outside a domain" (8). The privileged domain, in this instance, we can identify as the hospital and the center of male medical discourse. Moore's description of the birth of Esther's son lingers on the medical debate preceding the administration of chloroform to underscore her removal from participation in the act of giving birth. Despite the increasing intensity of Esther's pain, one of the medical students insists that "her time [has] not come"; to support his claim, he "expound[s] much medical and anatomical knowledge" while "the nurses [listen] with the usual deference" (Moore XVI). Here, I suggest, the ambiguity with which Moore describes the medical student's technical explanation of Esther's condition critiques the efficacy of male medical obstetrics in the extent to which it re-privileges knowledge about the pregnant body as male. The vagueness of the "medical and anatomical knowledge" classifies that knowledge as privileged; narrating the event of her son's birth in medical discourse—a discourse unintelligible to Esther—signifies her removal from the story and the erasure of her maternal experience in favor of viewing her body as an object of medical study.

The administration of chloroform that follows shortly thereafter epitomizes this erasure. While the text suggests that the severity of Esther's pain certainly necessitates the use of anesthesia, Moore highlights the privileged, medical point of view over Esther's own awareness and comprehension of her condition to emphasize the extent to which medical objectification of the woman's body silences female agency in her rite of passage into motherhood. The fact that Esther's interruption in the debate over whether or not to administer chloroform is merely a wordless cry of pain signifies the silencing, or at least the incommunicability of her narrative point of view (Moore XVI). Moore offers no description of the birth itself; the drug the doctor administers, though intended as pain relief, becomes synonymous with male medical control of the maternal narrative, suggestively depriving Esther of experiencing the rite of passage from expectant to official motherhood. In her discussion of point of view and narrative agency in the novel, Siobhan Chapman observes that "the narrative breaks off and resumes as Esther loses and regains consciousness, mirroring the way in which, in the novel in general, the narrative remains with events which Esther herself witnesses" (307). Chapman further argues that "Esther's seduction and her subsequent pregnancy and childbirth are central to her story, and as such they are described as she experiences them" (307). Yet while Chapman points to such passages as "she could hear the chatter of the nurses" and "at every moment she expected to lose consciousness" as moments in which Moore provides the reader with direct information about Esther's experiences,
such passages do not show Esther actively participating in her son's birth (Chapman 307; Moore XVI). The description of Esther's experience following the administration of chloroform does indicate that the story is still being narrated through her point of view, but Moore places emphasis on her detachment from rather than her experiences within her maternal body.

Moore further criticizes the social devaluation of the impoverished, single woman's maternal experience through the commodification of Esther's body as a wet-nurse, which work she must undertake in order to support her son. While doctors sometimes decried the wet-nursing system as largely contributing to child neglect and infant mortality, physicians like William Acton famously supported the practice as a means of restoring the fallen woman to the "path of purity" (183). If the fallen woman's motherhood is (presumably) the result of self-gratification or, in the case of the prostitute, an economic exchange rather than a purposeful act of procreation, performing maternal service as a wet-nurse in the home of another family for a "legitimate child" suggests transforms that act of deviance into one of purpose that benefits the community. Yet while claiming that this system also enabled the woman to provide for her own child, such an opinion conveniently overlooked the neglect that might ultimately render such financial support unnecessary. Tess O'Toole briefly touches upon this dismissal in her discussion of the appropriation of the wet-nurse's body in the advancement of colonialism—a reading that locates motherhood within an economic market as a national and imperial asset. Following the death of Esther's mother, her step-father plans to emigrate with the family to Australia, and her younger sister Jenny appeals to her for money, without which she cannot accompany them. Despite being nearly destitute, Esther offers her sister what little money she has left on condition of the hospital matron's promise that she will find Esther a well-paying position as a wet-nurse. O'Toole argues that "this plot detail is suggestive, implying a link between wet-nurses and populating the colonies as two uses to which otherwise superfluous working-class bodies can be put" (329). Here Moore suggests that commodifying motherhood through the wet-nursing industry often overlooks the fact that the position of wet-nurse is inextricably linked to being a mother (or at the very least to having given birth). In her position as wet-nurse, Esther fulfills her civic duty as mother to strengthen the nation and its colonies, but at the cost of supporting her child. To redeem herself and attain social respectability, Esther must deny her illicit motherhood, the very state of being which, paradoxically, enables her to serve as a wet-nurse. Moore considers this sacrifice of the maternal identity to an even

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5 In an article linking wet-nursing to infant mortality and infanticide, the British Medical Journal claimed that "there is another kind of child-destruction, equally sure in its effects, though not so manifest and patent in the eye of the public and the police; and this fatal influence finds its origin in the system of wet-nursing...What becomes of the children of wet-nurses while their mothers are suckling the offspring of other persons? Are not numbers of their lives yearly sacrificed as a direct result of wet-nursing?" ("Child-Murder: Its Relation to Wet-Nursing" 68).
greater extent through Jacky’s eventual enlistment in the military, through which Esther ultimately fulfills her civic duty as mother—a point I will return to at the end of the essay.

To better illustrate how this paradox of maternal sacrifice operated along class-delineated lines, Moore intersperses Esther’s maternal narrative with glimpses of other upper-class maternal narratives—namely those of her two employers, Mrs. Rivers and Mrs. Barfield. Upon first introducing Mrs. Rivers, Moore immediately draws attention to the contrast between the two women to position maternal inclination over socioeconomic privilege as the greater claim to motherhood. In contrast to Esther’s strength and tenderness, Mrs. Rivers’s implied frailty with her thinness and her disagreeable voice together with her dismissive attitude toward her daughter suggest that she is both unwilling and unable to fulfill the responsibilities of motherhood; she alternately refers to her child as “it” and “the little thing” and complains that “it never ceases crying” (Moore XVIII). Her descriptions of the baby as object rather than person underscore the child’s function as status symbol for the rich and idle mother, and Mrs. Rivers’s child operates primarily as a symbol of luxury. Passing through the house with her new employer, Esther observes the “soft hangings and bright porcelain” that signify comfort, and the child appears at the end of this tour, yet another of the “beautiful things” that Mrs. Rivers owns (Moore XVIII). Even her husband, the “tall, handsome gentleman” standing in the doorway of one of the beautifully decorated rooms, appears silent, as if on display (Moore XVIII). This showcase of luxury and comfort appearing just prior to introducing the child certifies Mrs. Rivers as the rich woman who can afford to own and maintain a child. In this show of class hierarchy, there exists the implication that the investment of having a child is a luxury that the working-class woman cannot afford because the so-called “work” of motherhood, while offering the intangible reward of sentimental love, brings no tangible, economic return in exchange for that labor.

If the working-class child has only economic value, Esther’s sentimental attachment to her son—which suggestively interferes with her “working” relationship with her nursling—decreases his economic utility. In order for Jacky to fulfill his utility as a wage-earning child, he must contribute to Esther’s income. While on the most basic level he fulfills this utility simply with his birth that enables Esther to lactate, by suckling at her breast, he would become, physically and economically, a consumer—a usurper of the commodity his existence enables Esther to market with no lucrative return for his consumption. While Esther’s maternal body renders her serviceable as a wet-nurse, Moore represents characters like Mrs. Rivers and the baby-farmer Mrs. Spires casting her in nonmaternal terms to underscore the economic impracticality of forming any sentimental attachment to her child. Endeavoring to convince Esther to abandon Jacky, Mrs. Spires explains that women like Mrs. Rivers “’ates their nurses to be a ’ankering after their own. They asks if the child is dead very often, and won’t engage them if it isn’t” (Moore XVII). The dead infant here signifies the ultimate erasure of the wet-nurse’s motherhood, as his existence represents the
single—most tangible evidence of that rite of passage. Immediately after offering to "take the child off [Esther's] hands," Mrs. Spires tells her, "if you likes to go out as wet-nurse again, I'll take the second off yer 'ands too" (Moore XIV). Thus by invoking the infant as a means of enabling the wet-nurse to continue in her employment, Esther's emotional but economically valueless attachment to Jacky and her maternal identity become reclassified as reproductive labor, likening the working-class, maternal body to a machine. Too young to earn his keep by contributing to the household income, the infant's role in the wet-nursing industry creates for him a niche—however small and dispensable—in the economic market. To keep the child alive through regular payments to the baby-farmer would be economically counterproductive, draining the mother of her financial resources with no return. Thus having contributed—however unwittingly—to rendering his mother qualified to work as a wet-nurse, the abandoned infant has fulfilled his economic niche and is therefore dispensable.

Moore criticizes this commodification of mother and infant through Mrs. Rivers's appraisal of Esther's physical suitability for her position: "Glancing suspiciously at Esther, whose breast was like a little cup, Mrs. Rivers said, 'I hope you have plenty of milk?'" (Moore XVIII). This observation serves first and foremost to appraise the utility of Esther's body for the labor Mrs. Rivers has hired her to perform; Esther's breast, rather than representing the physical and emotional nourishment associated with the maternal breast, functions solely as the source of a commodity. Despite the fact that sterilization and pasteurization saw a shift toward bottle-feeding infants during the latter half of the century, public discourse still occasionally idealized breast-feeding; an article in the British Medical Journal offering advice about how to correctly bottle-feed opens with the statement: "We are all agreed that the infant thrives best on its mother's milk. From various causes, into which we cannot now enter, mothers are prevented from nursing their infants" (Law 130; "The Artificial Feeding of Infants" 118). This thinly veiled castigation of artificial feeding and wet-nursing makes no effort to distinguish between the aristocratic mother such as Mrs. Rivers who chooses for fashion and convenience to hire a nurse and the working mother in Esther's position who has no other means of supporting her children than to suckle those of another woman.

The idealization of nursing one's own child underscores the extent to which commodifying the wet-nurse's body dissociates her breast with maternal love in favor of its economic utility. When Mrs. Rivers questions Esther about the bountiful supply of her milk, Esther assures her, "They said at the hospital I could bring up twins" (Moore XVIII). More than the significance of Esther's physical fitness for motherhood by affirming her body's ability to healthily nurse more than one child is the fact that she could easily nurse twins. This carries the implication that she could easily nurse Jacky herself without depleting her supply of marketable milk. Yet the suggestion of twins creates a linkage between rich and poor child through breast milk—a dangerously sibling-like equality—that dissolves clearly-delineated class boundaries: "Wherever milk was exchanged," argues Jules Law, "the fear of contamination...was never far off"
(148). Such contamination was both physical—the transference of harmful substances like alcohol from wet-nurse to infant—and cultural contamination. The detachment of Esther from her son thus operates as both a literal and a symbolic sterilization of her breast milk to render it fit for the upper-class child’s consumption.

While Mrs. Rivers instructs Mrs. Spires to bring Jacky to see Esther every few weeks, the text never shows Jacky entering Mrs. Rivers’s home, though Mrs. Spires appears occasionally to give a report. Moreover, when she does visit, Mrs. Rivers restricts her access to Esther: "You must have my permission before you see my nurse" (Moore XVIII). This rigorous policing of class boundaries serves the dual purpose of protecting the rich child from contact with the poor child and removing Esther from participation in Jacky’s life-narrative. Restricting contact between Mrs. Spires and Esther restricts the only residual contact Esther has with Jacky. Mrs. Spires’s presence operates as a reminder of Esther’s own motherhood; thus Mrs. Rivers’s restriction of Esther’s access to information about Jacky’s narrative of growth denies Esther participation in that narrative. If the claim to motherhood here is synonymous with actively caring for one’s child rather than merely giving birth and providing financial support, to refuse Esther access to Jacky—to delegate to someone else the task of caring for him—denies Esther the full experience of motherhood.

Moore’s emphasis on active child-rearing as constituting the full maternal experience speaks to the Victorian notion of motherhood as "woman’s work" which coincided with the rise of the middle-class gentleman that demanded children—and especially sons—be reared into productive citizen-laborers. Considering Jacky’s future, Esther envisions him some day "learning a trade, going to work in the morning and coming back to her in the evening, proud in the accomplishment of something done, of good money honestly earned" (Moore XIII). This dream suggests a definition of motherhood that merges economic utility with sentimental love; Esther envisions Jacky’s success as a man in terms of honest work, suggesting both moral fortitude and a contribution to society and his family through useful labor. Moreover, Esther imagines him returning to her at the end of his work day, signifying both her pride in the son she has raised and the fact that she can, in fact, receive remuneration for her maternal labor. To raise Jacky into a self-sufficient wage-earner proves his worth as more than a mere consumer of resources. Yet while Jacky’s return to his mother at the end of his work day arguably constructs the parent-child relationship as an economic exchange wherein child-labor is merely repayment for parental labor, Esther’s dream focuses not on the utility of Jacky’s labor as it benefits herself, but rather on the greater benefit to the community—her son’s ability to go out into the world and make his way as a man. His return to her thus operates less as remuneration and more as tangible proof of her maternal success.

Moore thus argues that the child’s growth into successful manhood depends upon a mother’s emotional as well as financial investment in him. This does not discount any emotional attachment the wet-nurse might form to her charge as well as her own child; yet Mrs. Rivers’s appropriation of Esther's
maternal affection as paid labor strips it of any sentimentality. Her declaration that she ought to have engaged a nurse who had "lost her baby" endeavors to capitalize on the wet-nurse's loss (Moore XVIII). This serviceable appropriation of the maternal body is predicated upon the idea that—presuming the mother had formed an emotional attachment to her own child—the wet-nurse who has lost her baby and desires one to love can redirect her grief into a source of income. Such a view, however, casts sentimental maternal affection as a luxury rather than a common female experience. As with the application of Esther's proposed wet-nursing wages to support colonialism by aiding her family's emigration to Australia, the commodification of maternal affection suggests that the woman forced to market her maternal services can experience motherhood only vicariously. More importantly, relocating the unwed mother within a family as a wet-nurse renders her supposed illicit motherhood a socially legitimate purpose. Within the sanctity of the legitimate family, the wet-nurse's illicit sexuality becomes, as William Acton intimated, a rite of purification to atone for presumed sexual deviance. Yet this redirecting of the wet-nurse's maternal labor implicitly places greater sentimental value on the legitimate child and suggests that her vicarious maternal experience through wet-nursing is the result of her own unworthiness for motherhood.

Through Esther's story, however, Moore concludes that the single, working-class mother can in fact raise a child to productive adulthood, though not without cost—both economic and emotional. As the novel concludes, we find Jacky struggling to find work, and Esther must occasionally send him money from her wages. Far from the hard-working man proudly presenting himself and his earnings to his mother, the grown Jacky struggling to live on six shillings a week as a toymaker has—despite his mother's ambitions—seemingly failed to live up to his projected market value as Esther has envisioned. Herein lies an echoing reminder of the implication that the long-term investment of child-rearing is one that the single, working-class mother cannot afford to make. It is Jacky's struggle to find work that prompts him to join the military—a service which, like his unwitting contribution to the wet-nursing industry, could potentially cost him his life. Ultimately, however, Moore's novel defies the social prejudice that suggestively labels the working-class child such as Jacky a failed man.

Though Esther eventually returns to Woodview to seek work—at the home of her first situation and place of Jacky's conception—where Mrs. Barfield now lives alone, the juxtaposition of rich and poor mother presents a cautionary tale against measuring child worth along class-delineated lines. The final image of Woodview that Moore depicts offers a scene of financial and domestic ruin; Mrs. Barfield's husband and daughter have died, and the house and grounds have fallen into neglect and decay as a result of the family's gambling debts. Not having heard from her own son in months, Mrs. Barfield both esteems and envies Esther. Impoverished though Esther is, she has still raised a son in whom she can, at least in her own estimation, take pride. Concluding the novel with Jacky's visit to his mother at Woodview legitimates the successful outcome of Esther's
maternal narrative. Through Jacky, Moore invokes the heroism of military service as the honorable (if potentially sacrificial) reward for a mother's job well done.

Jacky's enlistment in the military both fulfills an economic niche in society and proves that he has grown into the strong, productive citizen Esther envisioned him becoming. Here raising a soldier is the greatest possible outcome of successfully fulfilled maternal labor, placing public service and national duty above personal gain. On the one hand, Jacky's career as a soldier arguably acts as a means of rendering him dispensable under the auspices of national duty; Esther's reflection that "any moment might declare him to be mere food for powder and shot"—a description that obliterates his body and identity—suggestively links his military service as a man to his unwitting contribution to the wet-nursing industry and the literal "food" with which his very existence services more economically privileged children (Moore XLVIII). On the other hand, in the same way that Esther's decision to raise her son to manhood defies the so-called valuelessness of her illicit motherhood, Jacky's military service proves his worth not merely as a soldier and laborer, but a man whose work extends beyond mere economic self-sufficiency in service to the nation.

Moore invokes the comparison of Jacky with Mrs. Barfield's son to challenge the perception of measuring child value in terms of class privilege rather than the ability to contribute meaningfully to society. On the very day that Esther expects Jacky to pay a visit to her at Woodview, Mrs. Barfield is fretting over her son's participation in a horse race—the very pastime that has driven her family to financial ruin: "I never have an easy moment when I hear he's going to ride in one of these races. Suppose one day I were to hear that he was carried back on a shutter" (Moore XLVIII). Esther responds to her mistress's worries—in a tone of implied resentment, "We mustn't let our minds run on such things, mam. If a war was to break out tomorrow, what should I do? His [Jacky's] regiment would be ordered out" (Moore XLVIII). Moore conveys his criticism of the upper-class refusal to acknowledge the maternal experience of the working mother through the potential fate of each son respectively. The image of the broken body of Mrs. Barfield's son trampled in a horse race represents an unnecessary loss of young life with potential, and, more importantly, a downfall brought about in part by the economic impracticality of gambling. In contrast, Jacky's potential death on the battlefield offers a selfless sacrifice of life in public service. Thus despite the suggested erasure of Esther's maternal narrative, it is Jacky—the apparently dispensable son—who ultimately legitimates the success of that narrative. Presenting Jacky to Mrs. Barfield in the very place where he had been conceived offers legitimate proof that "she had accomplished her woman's work—she had brought him up to man's estate; and that was her sufficient reward" (Moore XLI).

Moore emphasizes each mother's reversal of situation in this final scene; as the work-worn mother presents her son to the well-to-do mother whose home and family have disintegrated, it is clear that Esther is the more successful of the two, for it is she who has worked for and reaped the benefit of maternal
service. Mrs. Barfield’s carefully tended flowers described at the beginning of the novel now contrast sharply with the landscape of domestic decay we see at its conclusion. The imagined scenario of her son’s broken body takes on even greater significance here as a caveat against over-indulgent mothering. Jacky’s upright, soldierly figure compares favorably with the man who abandons himself to the profligacies of gambling. Flowers and children alike here operate as an occupation with which the idle mother fills her long days—a luxurious indulgence that favors form over functionality. If Mrs. Barfield’s children—one dead, one threatening self-destruction—are the delicate, sentimental pets of the doting mother, Jacky, like the vegetable garden the two women tend for their own sustenance in the final chapter, is the sturdy, well-cultivated product of loving dedication and hard work.

Moore invokes the trope of mother as gardener to define maternal purpose as work that conjoins utility and sentimentality. If the vegetable garden is not decoratively beautiful, it nonetheless requires care to maintain; moreover, it arguably creates its own form of beauty through the health and wholesomeness it offers with its nourishment. Esther Waters thus exposes the struggle of the working-class, single mother to legitimate the value of her hard work and self-sacrifice in the face of class prejudice. That Moore achieves this by linking successful motherhood to national duty in the raising of a soldier effectively renders woman an arbiter in the nation’s future rather than a mere provider of labor.
Works Cited


