In their Special Topics in Fiction: Popular Fiction by Women (ENG39395) class, Dr. Jeannette E. Riley and Professor Laurie Delaney asked students to explore the depiction of women in a romance, detective, or science fiction novel by a woman author. Kurt Sampsel chose to write on Sara Paretsky’s *Indemnity Only*. His essay, “Motherless Child, Childless Mother: The Unique Relationships in Sara Paretsky’s *Indemnity Only*,” examines the life of the novel’s protagonist, V.I. Warshawski, and applies the groundbreaking theoretical work of feminist author Nancy Chodorow to explain the significance of the relationships V.I. forms with other women throughout her life.

Feminist author Nancy Chodorow has become known for her groundbreaking work applying feminism to psychoanalytic theory. Her 1989 book *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* extensively explores how relationships—particularly relationships between women—influence such psychological constructs as identity, gender distinction, and self-awareness. Chodorow’s article “The Sexual Sociology of Adult Life” specifically discusses the ways in which parenting, especially mothering, instills gender identification in children.

In both her book and article, Chodorow thematically explores the different ways in which female relationships manifest themselves in order to fulfill the needs of both women involved. Chodorow argues that relationships between women have a profound influence on the establishment, maintenance, and growth of gender identification. This assertion holds true in analyzing Sara Paretsky’s mystery novel *Indemnity Only*. In the book, private investigator V.I. Warshawski continuously reveals ways in which her relationship with her mother influenced her. In her adulthood, Warshawski still feels a need for the intimacy and mutual support which the mother-daughter relationship can provide. In the absence of a daughter or surviving mother, V.I. seeks out relationships with other women; she constructs a surrogate family with her friends Lotty and Jill. This surrogate family offers V.I. a taste of both daughterhood and motherhood, reinforcing her identity as a woman while allowing her to maintain her independence.

Chodorow examines the important role that the mother-daughter relationship plays in the development of a woman’s identity. Because of the relative accessibility of mothers (as opposed to fathers), feminine gender ideals are also more easily accessible. Chodorow states, “[B]ecause children are first around women, women’s family roles and being feminine are more available and often more intelligible to growing children than masculine roles and being masculine” (“Sexual Sociology” 293). This concept of a natural tendency for children, especially daughters, to inherit gender ideals from one’s mother is reinforced by V.I. Warshawski’s relationship with her late mother in *Indemnity Only*, although it is simultaneously challenged by Warshawski’s actions. Apparently, V.I.’s ideals of womanhood differed somewhat from those of her mother, especially when it came to choosing a career. Warshawski recalls of her mother, “She had hoped I would be a singer and had trained me patiently; she certainly wouldn’t have liked my being a detective” (Paretsky 14-15). Here, V.I. acknowledges that she chose a lifestyle different from the more traditionally feminine one which her mother had envisioned, and she seems to feel guilt for rejecting the “natural” gender ideals which her mother tried to instill in her.

V.I. later lets the reader know that career choice was not the extent of her and her mother’s disagreements. It seems Warshawski’s mother kept trying to steer V.I. into other “feminine” directions, but with little result. V.I. states, “She’d probably disapprove of my work, if she were alive, but she would never let me slouch at the dinner table grumbling because it wasn’t turning out right” (Paretsky 99). Chodorow offers psychoanalytical insight into this mother-daughter squabbling, saying, “Because the first identification for children of both genders has always been with their mothers, they argue [. . .]” (“Sexual Sociology” 293). Although V.I. expresses regret at alienating
her mother via her dismissal of “feminine” characteristics, she seems to believe that her more masculine traits often come in handy. When talking about repeated childhood fights she took part in, V.I. states, "Oh my mother hated it, but she died when I was fifteen, and my dad was thankful that I could take care of myself" (Paretisky 101). With all her references to her mother, Warshawski makes it clear that her mother had a profound influence, despite their disagreements. She maintains an admiration for her late mother, and she sees her as a virtuous, if old-fashioned, woman.

This dynamic of disapproval between V.I. and her mother would appear to have roots in the empathic bond which is central to the mother-daughter relationship. Chodorow argues that mothers and daughters can sometimes reach such a level of empathy as to blur the distinctions of their individual identities. Chodorow states that mothers and daughters often “[describe] their experiences of boundary confusion or equation of self and other, for example, guilt and self-blame for the other's unhappiness; shame and embarrassment at the other's actions; daughters’ discovery that they are ‘really’ living out their mothers’ lives [. . .].” (Psychoanalytic Theory 58).

Applying this theory to Indemnity Only, one could assume that V.I.’s empathic relationship with her mother led to the sense of guilt Warshawski seems to feel for estranging her mother via her "unladylike" choice of lifestyle.

In Indemnity Only, Warshawski tells the reader of this “guilt and self-blame” that she feels for disappointing her mother, albeit in an indirect way. After V.I.’s apartment is torn up, she finds broken the wine glasses which were a beloved heirloom of her late mother. Warshawski blames herself, thinking, "My mother had carried those glasses from Italy in a suitcase and not a one had broken. Nineteen years married to a cop on the South Side of Chicago and not a one had broken” (132). V.I. then gets into the heart of her guilt when she reflects, “If I had become a singer, as she had wanted, this would never have happened” (132). It becomes clear that the wine glasses are merely an incarnation, or perhaps an outlet, for the true guilt V.I. feels for having chosen a different path of life than her mother would have had for her. Nancy Chodorow argues that this sense of guilt is very common for both mothers and daughters to feel on the behalf of one another due to the extreme level of empathy which they share.

Chodorow believes that the self-blame which exists because of empathy between mothers and daughters often results in the women leading a sort of shared identity rather than two distinct identities. Chodorow explains, “The reason is that the mother-daughter relation is the one form of personal identification that, because it results so easily from the normal situation of child development, is liable to be excessive in the direction of allowing no room for separation or difference between mother and daughter” (Psychoanalytic Theory 59). Thus, because of this empathic bond, there exists a fragile debt or obligation between mother and daughter which each tries to honor. Since daughters seem to often share an identity with their mothers, to hurt one’s mother becomes just as abhorrent as to hurt oneself. It seems that V.I. Warshawski feels that she hurt her mother by not choosing the life she had laid out for her. Thus, she feels guilt for the decision she made.

Despite the obligation that the empathic bond of the mother-daughter relationship entails, Chodorow believes that it is natural for the daughter to eventually reject her mother due to her “second sex” status in a patriarchal society. Chodorow explains, “Most psychoanalytic and social theorists claim that the mother inevitably represents to her daughter (and son) regression, passivity, dependence, and lack of orientation to reality [. . .].” (Psychoanalytic Theory 64).

Chodorow goes on to say that, thus, “For the daughter, feminine gender identification means identification with a devalued, passive mother, and personal maternal identification is with a mother whose own self-esteem is low” (Psychoanalytic Theory 64).

Because identification with a girl’s mother represents the threat of accepting the “second sex” status for herself, girls often reject their mothers either consciously or subconsciously. Chodorow discusses how the mother-daughter relationship—particularly in its weakening—harbors the need for women to have ongoing affective relationships with other women. Chodorow explains, “a daughter develops relationships of attachment to and identification with other adult women. Loosening her tie to her mother therefore does not entail the rejection of all women” (Psychoanalytic Theory 64). Thus, women have a tendency to seek out relationships with other women even after distancing themselves from her their mothers. In Indemnity Only, V.I. Warshawski mentions how much easier it is for her to have relationships with women rather than with men. Warshawski states, "I have some close women friends, because I don’t feel..."
they're trying to take over my turf. But with men, it always seems, or often seems, as though I'm having to fight to maintain who I am" (209). Choosing relationships with women instead of men helps V.I. by allowing her the opportunity to prove herself to be strong and intelligent without the constant battle of having to vie with men.

Apparently, Warshawski pursues relationships with women because she acknowledges the inequalities of the social hierarchy and prefers not to be put into a situation where she would have to "compete" with men. Chodorow addresses this issue when discussing mothers and daughters, although the same holds true for relationships between any women. Chodorow states, "The close tie that remains between mother and daughter is based not simply on mutual over-involvement but often on mutual understanding of their oppression" (Psychoanalytic Theory 64-65). This "mutual understanding" is powerful for women because it provides them with support, which is an essential tool for coping with a world which tends to view women as the "second sex." This support proves particularly valuable to V.I. Warshawski as a woman working in a field dominated by men. In her work as a private investigator, Warshawski is constantly contending with men. As a result, V.I. prefers to spend her personal time with women because it allows her to temporarily escape the gender conflict which is so prevalent in her job.

Chodorow argues that because women are often constructed by culture as being relationally oriented, they tend to place high emphasis on the relationships in their lives, particularly the ones they share with other women. Culture frequently perceives women not simply as women, but views them according to the relational identities that they fulfill, perceiving them as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives. Because of this, Chodorow stresses the important role that the family plays in the establishment and reinforcement of a woman's identity. She states, "Women much more than men will find a primary identity in the family" ("Sexual Sociology" 294). Chodorow also states the importance of the continuation of relationships between women, particularly the mother-daughter relationship, saying, "Girls' identification processes, then, are more continuously embedded in and mediated by their ongoing relationships with their mother" ("Sexual Sociology" 295). Chodorow believes that relationships between women are essential throughout a woman's life: "the mother-daughter tie and other female kin relations remain important from a woman's childhood through her old age" (Psychoanalytic Theory 61). Chodorow likely stresses the importance of continuing relationships between women throughout life because she believes the mutual support and understanding that these relationships provide is useful to a woman in all her stages of life. Again, since culture tends to see women according to their relational identities (daughter, mother, wife, etc.), it is important for women to affirm their personal identities as they progress from one relational position to another.

Although V.I. Warshawski recognizes the importance of female social ties and values the dynamic of the mother-daughter relationship, she possesses neither a surviving mother or a daughter. Chodorow would argue that Warshawski, like all women, has 'relational needs' which need to be fulfilled. Chodorow states, "One way that women fulfill these needs is through the creation and maintenance of important personal relations with other women" (Psychoanalytic Theory 76). Interestingly however, V.I. chooses to form relationships with not just any women, but with two women who represent the roles of mother and daughter to her.

In the absence of her late mother, V.I. seeks out relationships with other women, and finds a respectable motherly figure in her elder friend Lotty. Lotty is not just a substitute mother, however. She is the type of modern woman that Warshawski always wished her mother could have been. Warshawski notes of Lotty, "She held fierce opinions on a number of things, and put them into practice in medicine, often to the dismay of her colleagues" (108). Therefore, it seems that Warshawski likes Lotty precisely because she does not possess the "second sex" characteristics which tend to compel daughters to reject their mothers. Lotty is certainly at odds with the conventional gender notion that "mothers represent regression and lack of autonomy" ("Sexual Sociology" 296). Thus, V.I. feels compelled to embrace and respect Lotty rather than reject her as she did her late mother. Warshawski's real mother embodied all the traditional "second sex" qualities and accepted her position in the social hierarchy; V.I. admires Lotty because her autonomous lifestyle is a direct contradiction to the traditional motherly acceptance of the inequality of patriarchy. Because of the great cultural changes that occurred between her mother's generation and her own, Warshawski seeks a new role model who represents the "new woman." Lotty possesses many of the tools for this new world that V.I.'s
mother did not know in her time. As culture has changed, so has Warshawski’s social sphere.

To V.I., Lotty is more a friend than an authority figure. Lotty fulfills Warshawski’s need for a mother figure perfectly because she respects Lotty not only as an elder, but also as a female peer with similar ideals. In addition, it is quite possible that Warshawski values her relationship with Lotty because of the dynamic of “guilt and self-blame” that Nancy Chodorow believes many daughters associate with their mothers. V.I.’s amiable relationship with Lotty offers her a sort of “reconciliation” which was never achieved between Warshawski and her late mother. In a way, one could argue that V.I.’s relationship with Lotty is an affirmation of Warshawski’s once shaken faith in the value of the mother-daughter relationship. By valuing her relationship with an older woman, Warshawski has shown that the conflict she had with her mother was due not to age or authority but to merely to differing beliefs regarding the roles of women.

In her quest to fulfill her “relational needs,” V.I. continues to seek friendship with women and explores the other end of the mother-daughter experience via her relationship with Jill. In her assertion that a woman’s primary identity tends to be found in the home, Chodorow states that a daughter “learns what it is to be womanlike in the context of this personal identification with her mother and often with other female models (kin, teachers, mother’s friends, mothers of friends)” (“Sexual Sociology” 294). In the absence of children of her own, Warshawski takes Jill into her protection partially to experience the identity of motherhood. In addition, V.I. feels compelled to care for Jill because of her motivation to see justice carried out. This not only entails criminal justice, but also familial justice. V.I. is genuinely concerned with how people treat one another. She realizes that Jill’s family doesn’t give Jill the attention or support she needs. Therefore, V.I. takes Jill into her protection and offers her the attention and consideration she deserves.

Just as women have a tendency to form and reinforce their personal identity through their role as daughters, women also gain a sense of self-actualization by fulfilling the role of mother. As discussed earlier, Nancy Chodorow believes that the empathic bond which exists between mothers and daughters establishes a sort of symbiotic identity which both parties share. While this shared identity can be psychologically challenging for the daughter, Chodorow seems to believe that it has the potential to benefit the mother.

Chodorow states, “It seems, then, that a mother is more likely to identify with a daughter than with a son, to experience the daughter (or parts of the daughter’s life) as herself” (Psychoanalytic Theory 49). Chodorow goes on to discuss how the mother-daughter relationship can sometimes allow the mother to “use” the daughter’s realization of identity as a means of reinforcing her own. Some mothers, however, abuse this aspect of the empathic bond. Chodorow says that such mothers who participated in a study did now allow their daughters to perceive themselves as separate people, but simply acted as if the daughters were narcissistic extensions or doubles of themselves, extensions to whom were attributed the mothers’ bodily feelings and who became physical vehicles for their mothers’ achievement of autoerotic gratification. The daughters were bound into a mutually dependent ‘hypersymbiotic’ relationship. (Psychoanalytic Theory 49)

Although this particular scenario described by Chodorow is a somewhat extreme case—a study of “disturbed mothers”—the basic underlying principle is applicable to the average mother-daughter relationship. Chodorow argues that although both parties participate and benefit from the empathic bond of the mother-daughter relationship, mothers often achieve a sort of egotistical gratification from the achievement of seeing their daughters acculturate themselves to female gender roles. Certainly it is true that performing the role of mother is often an experience of growth, self-actualization, and fulfillment.

Indeed, V.I. seems to find great fulfillment in caring for Jill. Warshawski says of Jill, “Something about her pierced my heart, made me long for the child I’d never had” (Paretsky 186). On several occasions, V.I. Warshawski indicates her longing to experience the role of mother. When observing a family in the park, she notes, “I felt a small stirring of envy. On a beautiful summer day it might be nice to be having a picnic with my children instead of hiding a fugitive from the police and the mob” (Paretsky 280). While such occasions tempt Warshawski to abandon her independent lifestyle and take up a family, Warshawski both values her lifestyle and maintains her cynicism for family life, saying, “There really are times when I wish I did have a couple of children and was doing the middle-class family thing. But that’s a myth you now” (Paretsky 211-212).
Like Lotty, Jill offers V.I. Warshawski an idealistic (if perhaps unrealistic) sample of the mother-daughter relationship. Warshawski's relationship with Jill also gives her a sort of understanding of her late mother by offering her a taste of the challenges and obligations of motherhood and thus allowing her to empathize with her mother's situation. In short, Warshawski's relationship with Jill provides V.I. with the feeling of motherhood without presenting her with some of the more serious consequences that accompany true conventional motherhood. In the end, V.I. makes the decision that although motherhood has its benefits, her independent lifestyle is something that she—at least for now—is unwilling to sacrifice. In addition, she recalls her brief experience with marriage and concludes that the cultural conception that true womanly fulfillment comes from being wife and mother remains largely a "myth."

In her book *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* and her article "The Sexual Sociology of Adult Life," Nancy Chodorow explores the important role that the mother-daughter relationship plays in the development and reinforcement of a woman's identity and her understanding of gender roles. Chodorow argues that mother-daughter relationships, as well as all relationships between women, benefit both parties in unique and distinctive ways. Chodorow also discusses how the continuation of female relationships is essential to the emotional well-being of women. In Sara Paretsky's novel *Indemnity Only*, V.I. Warshawski exhibits longing to experience both spheres of the mother-daughter relationship. Although she lacks a daughter or living mother, Warshawski seeks out meaningful affective relationships with other women and constructs an alternative family from her relationships with Lotty and Jill. Both these women provide V.I. with an idyllic taste of motherhood and daughterhood respectively, while still allowing her to maintain the independence and freedom which is so important to her lifestyle as an autonomous, modern woman.

**Works Cited**

