

RIDDLES AND REVELATIONS:  
FORMS OF INCEST TELLING IN 20<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY AMERICA

by

Mako E. Yoshikawa

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(English Languages and Literature)  
in The University of Michigan  
2008

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Patricia S. Yaeger, Chair  
Associate Professor Paul A. Anderson  
Assistant Professor Joshua L. Miller  
Professor Simon E. Gikandi, Princeton University

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my committee at the University of Michigan. The English Department and the Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan as well as the Mellon Foundation offered invaluable financial support.

I would also like to thank Rob, for putting up with me through the last stages of this project, and my parents, James and Hiroko Sherwin, for their support, their intellectual insights and, of course, their patience.

## PREFACE

Since the beginnings of Western literature, incest telling has been tricked out in riddles. Sophocles' Oedipus Rex follows what I will be calling a riddle form. A question—why is there a plague on Thebes?—takes the title character on a quest which eventually leads to the dread answer: because its king has killed his father and is sleeping with his mother. Incest hides in this narrative, its secret waiting to be recognized and decoded. Oedipus' status as master riddle-solver calls attention to the riddle form; it is, after all, his fateful ability to answer the question posed by the Sphinx which has made him ruler of Thebes and husband to his own mother in the first place. That Oedipus cracked the Sphinx's riddle is back story; the beast's question is never stated within the play. Yet Sophocles makes us keenly aware of the irony that Oedipus, the legendary solver of a problem which turns on the ability to recognize "man," struggles so hard to solve a conundrum which turns on his ability to recognize himself. When Oedipus, struggling to make sense of who he is in relation to his parents, says to the soothsayer Teiresias, "What parents? Stop! Who are they of all the world?...How needlessly your riddles darken everything," Teiresias replies, "But it's in riddle answering you are strongest" (29). Claude Lévi-Strauss contends that "[A] correlation between riddles and incest exists among peoples separated by history, geography, language, and culture" (2): a rather sweeping statement, to be sure, but one which certainly speaks to Oedipus Rex.

I begin this project on 20<sup>th</sup>-century forms of the incest narrative with Oedipus because the riddle form is still the predominant model for contemporary incest narratives in American literature. We are, in fact, primed to read incest in a riddle plot—so much so that writers can play off our expectations and thereby manipulate us. In order to understand the other, newer forms of the incest narrative, we need to understand first how the riddle form operates, and second how it supports and reaffirms the incest taboo.

### **The Riddling of Incest**

Roland Barthes' description of a hermeneutic narrative explains both the structure and the appeal of the riddle form.

Expectation...becomes the basic condition for truth:  
truth...is what is at the end of expectation. This  
design...implies a return to order, for expectation is a  
disorder...truth is what completes, what closes. In short,  
based on the articulation of question and answer, the  
hermeneutic narrative is constructed according to our  
image of the sentence: an organism...reducible to a diadic  
unity of subject and predicate. To narrate (in the classic  
fashion) is to raise the question as if it were a subject which  
one delays predicating, and when the predicate (truth)  
arrives, the sentence, the narrative, are over, the world is  
adjektivized (after we had feared it would not be). (76)

Our desire to read the hermeneutic narrative hinges on our expectation that our expectations for resolution will be fulfilled. So, too, the standard incest text. In Oedipus Rex the play opens with Thebes in a state of crisis. In Barthes' formulation, we are attuned by the "déjà-lu" to an awareness of how the hermeneutic code operates, and so we read with what Peter Brooks terms the "anticipation of retrospection." Just as we naturally attend the predication of a sentence when we hear its start, so we read Oedipus

Rex in full confidence that the disorder of Thebes and also of our expectation will be resolved by the truth, which is incest.

In her discussion of contemporary incest narratives in mainstream American fiction, Katie Roiphe constructs a model that fits the mold of Barthes' hermeneutic narrative, arguing that "In Our Father, The Age of Consent, House Rules, and countless other novels, the entire story is reduced to a riddle, and incest is the answer.... The discovery of the central fact is like a flash of lightning illuminating the entire book" (68). The riddle, as she explains it, is simple for the most part. Relatively rare is the instance in which incest is actually set up as the answer to a more explicit riddle, as in Roman Polanski's Chinatown, a movie in which we are given a specific conundrum—why is Jake Gittes hired by a false Mrs. Mulwray to spy on her husband?—for which the answer is unexpected: because the real Mrs. Mulwray had a child by her father. The usual incest "riddle" is a vague sense that something is wrong. In Roiphe's deliberately facile summary: "Mary or Maisie or Rose is acting kind of strange. She is fat or promiscuous or bitter or she dives headfirst into a shallow pond, and it turns out, many pages later, that Mary or Maisie or Rose was molested as a child by her father or stepfather or father figure" (68). Texts that fit this rubric, which I am denominating the standard incest model, include Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres, Marilyn French's Our Father, Stephen King's Gerald's Game, the movie Clara's Heart, Dorothy Allison's "Violence Against Women Begins at Home," Mona Simpson's "Lawns," and the first novella in A.S. Byatt's Angels and Insects.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Byatt's text cleverly scrambles the solution to the mystery of William Adamson's unsatisfactory wife in the title, "insect" as an anagram for "incest." A singular example of such a text would be Freud's psychoanalytic readings of patients, in which he often

Barthes calls this narrative a “classic” form. Roiphe, by contrast, decries it on aesthetic grounds, noting the “astonishing sameness to the way [the scenes] are staged” (70), and the dependence of the narrative on the shock value of the revelation. In her words, “the situation itself is so extreme that it grabs our interest with very little skill on the part of the writer—like a murder or a car crash, it jolts us into the story” (69). Roiphe’s essay is a call to arms, an exhortation to move contemporary fiction away from this unproductive fixation. But in her reformatory zeal, Roiphe fails to recognize that she is describing a more widespread phenomenon. Not only does she overlook Lévi-Strauss’ claim for a correlation between riddles and incest, and the fact that the standard incest model follows Barthes’ outline for a hermeneutic narrative to the letter, she also fails to acknowledge that the trend is not just a contemporary phenomenon: canonical texts as diverse as Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders, William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! and, of course, Oedipus also posit incest as the solution to a riddle.

While not inaccurate, Roiphe’s conclusions are reductive. Narratives that fit this model can at its worst be as formulaic and banal as she suggests, but they can also be highly sophisticated, playing on our assumption that the revelation of incest will be the climactic moment of the story. In Absalom, Absalom!, one of the most complex texts of this kind, the riddle—why did the romance between Judith Sutpen and Charles Bon go astray?—leads to a series of revelations. We learn that Bon is Judith’s half brother, and that he is the son of a mulatta—and that it is the possibility of miscegenation rather than the threat of incest that is the real horror to the white characters. In the climax of the

---

traces the cause of the emotional disturbance back to an unresolved Oedipal complex, as in the case of Dora. Given a query—why does Dora cough?—Freud untangles the evidence in a journey that takes him to incestuous desire and the figure of the father.

novel, Quentin imagines Henry Sutpen, Judith's brother, confronting Bon: "You are my brother," he says to Bon, who responds, "No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister" (357-58). Suspended for one moment between hugging his brother and killing the "nigger," Henry decides upon the latter course of action. Incest, traditionally considered the ultimate taboo, functions as a touchstone for horror in this case: that miscegenation trumps it as both the more shocking revelation and the worse transgression suggests how horrifying the possibility of racial contamination is to Henry and the other white Southerners of the novel. In Bon's pointed words, "it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear" (356). Trained through our culture to conceive of incest as the primal transgression, we can only reel in horror from the portrayal of a society amoral enough to consider miscegenation the worse sin; Faulkner manipulates both the riddle form and the status of incest as the ultimate transgression.

Similarly, while incest lies hidden in the riddle form in Donna Tartt's The Secret History, it is just one of a slew of guilty secrets, among them Dionysian revelry, murder, homosexuality and—ranking way up there—a middle-class background: the easy acceptance of the revelation of incest by this group of very rich adolescents signals how corrupt their values are. At the start of Cormac McCarthy's Outer Dark, a woman gives birth to her brother's baby—an opening that not incidentally violates the conventions of the riddle narrative. The climactic moment in this novel is not the revelation of incest; there is no build-up of expectations to herald its arrival. The incest is, in fact, almost immediately overshadowed by the brother's abandonment of the baby in the woods and his lie to his sister about their baby's fate, and then, even more clearly, by the trio of mysterious, apparently supernatural men who kill and devour the baby at the end of the

novel. By suggesting that there are evils greater than incest—indeed, evils so great they dwarf incest as both sin and revelation—McCarthy exonerates the woman, Rinthy, of culpability for her transgression. He hijacks the standard incest model, using it a platform to tell us that there are sins far more unspeakable than incest.

Stephen King's Gerald's Game is particularly adroit in its use of incest as an easy shorthand for evil. The novel mocks the psychobabble of self-help groups and, in the process, subverts the genre of incest fiction. Naked and handcuffed to a bed after her sexually venturesome husband has died of a heart attack, Jessie Burlingame puzzles over the reason for the voices she has been hearing in her head after a literally dark day in her childhood. The answer, of course, is incest—as she eventually recalls, her father had sexually abused her during an eclipse when she was ten years old. What is striking is that although she is alone in a house that is allegedly hundreds of miles from the nearest person, she, like the incest victims of A Thousand Acres and Our Father, can only recover her repressed memory of incest by talking about it with other “characters”—in her case, the voices in her head, whom she names, argues with, and confesses secrets to, in standard incest narrative fashion. Thus King parodies such earnest, pop-psychology-informed works like Our Father, and transforms them as well: after the discovery or, rather, recovery of incest, which comes about halfway through the novel, the genre of bad incest is abandoned completely for the genre of superior horror fiction. Like Outer Dark, King's novel uses incest as a cultural touchstone, to contrast with a horror that far “eclipses” it: incest may be bad, the novel tells us, but it's nothing compared to homosexual necrophilia and cannibalism.



In taking the status of incest as the unsayable and using it as a platform to create a new unsayable, these texts serve as proof that the riddling of incest does not have to be banal. Still, Roiphe is correct in asserting that in contemporary American culture, the incest riddle is a veritable cliché; novels and films that adhere to this form are everywhere. Why is the incest riddle structure so popular; what does it offer writers and readers? Successful narrative models may be a self-perpetuating phenomenon, but I would argue that the prevalence of this structure is rooted in its relationship with the incest taboo. In setting up incest as a riddle which leads to a dread revelation, the standard incest model confirms our belief in incest as a transgression that is fearful, loathsome, and shocking. When the discovery of incest is delayed through riddling, the underlying assumption is that telling this transgression is such a fraught venture that it can derail the narrative; it is so horrific that we have to approach it obliquely, through coy hints, side-stepping, and enigmatic signs.

What the riddle plot tells us is that the incest revelation needs to dawn slowly; it cannot be sprung on us all at once. In that it defers the announcement of incest through the scattering of clues—the narrative equivalent of clearing one’s throat—the standard incest model affirms the view that speaking of incest is as vexed and taboo as the act itself: what the form suggests is that to tell incest is to say the unsayable.<sup>2</sup>

### **New Forms of the Incest Narrative**

This inquiry into contemporary forms of the incest narrative focuses on three women writers who reinvent the riddle form for their own ends. In chapter one, entitled

---

<sup>2</sup> Spillers’ provocative phrase (128).

“A Stepping Stone to Voice,” I examine Maxine Hong Kingston’s “No Name Woman.” The first narrative in the memoir The Woman Warrior, “No Name Woman” is permeated with an anxiety about voice. It begins with the narrator’s mother warning her never to repeat this story—a story which the narrator promptly proceeds to tell us. By beginning with a reference to a dangerous secret that should not be repeated, “No Name Woman” gains entry into a select tradition of narratives, a subcategory of the riddle form that I will call the “forbidden story.” I will propose that Kingston offers an interesting twist on this form: while Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and James Weldon Johnson make it clear what the respective secrets of their forbidden stories are, Kingston does not. The dangerous secret in Kingston’s text at first seems to be the possibility that the narrator’s aunt, a Chinese woman who is never named, had an incestuous relationship, yet against all expectations it turns out to involve the narrator’s own feelings of interracial desire. I will argue that in “No Name Woman” the telling of incest in fact enables the covert telling of miscegenation.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the fact that “No Name Woman” is the first work in the memoir is not a coincidence. The telling of miscegenation—the dangerous secret which should not be repeated—in turn fuels the telling of the memoir; it empowers the narrator to speak.

In the second chapter, “The Revelation of No Revelation,” I suggest that Willa Cather subverts the standard riddle form by posing an incest riddle but not answering it. Hints about incest are scattered through Sapphira and the Slave Girl, but Cather withholds the revelation of incest: the transgression is neither acknowledged nor named by the characters and narrator. Sapphira is the only novel that Cather set in the pre-

---

<sup>3</sup> In Absalom, Absalom!, by contrast, the narrative of incest conceals within it the narrative of miscegenation.

abolition South of her childhood, and I will argue that by suppressing the incest theme, Cather stirs up contradictions in her portrayal of the system of slavery. Blinded by the racist ideals of their culture, the white characters of her novel cannot see or admit the possibility that they might be related to the slave girl Nancy, and so put themselves at risk of committing incest. Cather is, perhaps, too subtle in her efforts: it is easy to miss the fact that she has suppressed the revelation of incest. Still, her attempt to indict slavery through a subversion of the standard incest model recuperates the novel from some of its criticisms.

Chapters three and four will simultaneously build upon and open up the previous discussion of incest and race to incorporate an analysis of class. In 1991, Kathryn Harrison published a novel, Thicker Than Water, and in 1997, a memoir entitled The Kiss. The two texts are astonishingly similar, with a story, a set of characters, and a host of scenes and details in common. Yet while Thicker Than Water received high critical praise, The Kiss was met with unprecedented vitriol. The case of The Kiss is an extraordinary one, and chapter three will parse the factors contributing to its hostile reception. To list but a couple, Harrison essentially repackaged the same story under two different titles, and when she did so she changed the genre of the narrative from novel to memoir; in an era in which, as critics such as Elizabeth Wilson have noted, incest is often considered an act limited to the lower classes, something that occurs only in the ghetto or Appalachia, Harrison's author photograph shows us a woman with pale skin, blond hair, blue eyes, and thin lips—a woman, that is, with patrician features.

In chapter four I will argue that a key factor in the controversy surrounding The Kiss is its narrative structure, which is a new and highly unusual one for an incest text—

the only example of such a structure that I can find. If the riddling of incest is common because it reassuringly confirms our belief that incest is a shocking transgression, it stands to reason that an incest narrative which violently subverts this model will be rare as well as controversial. In The Kiss, Harrison overturns the standard riddle plot by eschewing riddling altogether. In a process which I define as “the domestication of incest,” she chooses not to pave the way to the incest revelation through signs and clues, instead referring to her sexual relationship with her father in an offhand manner—and on the first page of the text. By sliding incest so easily into the narrative, she renders it ordinary and banal, a revelation no longer: saying incest becomes a commonplace utterance. I will contend that the fact that incest is not framed as a shocking revelation in this narrative structure is precisely what shocked the critics and the reviewers of the memoir.

Chapter four ends with a brief exploration of a film which came out the year before The Kiss: Lone Star, a film about the permeability and problems of the U.S.-Mexico borderline. Lone Star, like The Kiss, engages with incest in a way that diminishes its horror, although it does so at the end of the text rather than at its beginning. While the film did not receive anywhere near the same level of opprobrium as Harrison’s memoir, it, too, was criticized for its portrayal of incest, with one critic complaining that it presents the taboo as “just another alternative life style choice.”<sup>4</sup> Is Lone Star the same kind of incest narrative as The Kiss in a different medium? Perhaps the two texts together mark the beginning of an era characterized by a new, more casual and, some might say, more cavalier approach in telling incest.

---

<sup>4</sup> The critic, Linda Chavez, more generally deplors Hollywood’s “chipping away at the incest taboo” (qtd. in Davis and Womack: 211).

A memoir, written in 1977, about an Asian American who is plagued by anxiety about her right to speak; a critically dismissed novel about the South, penned in 1940 by an acclaimed novelist associated with the West and the South West; a controversial 1997 incest memoir by an upper-class white writer, and the acclaimed novel, its narrative doppelganger, which she wrote in 1991—it is clear that in terms of context and genre, the texts examined in this project range far and wide. These narratives also approach incest in markedly different ways: Kingston’s and Cather’s texts bury it, while Harrison’s memoir makes it explicitly, even aggressively apparent. Despite their differences, both ways of approaching incest speak to the same conclusion: they reinforce the centrality of the riddle plot for incest narratives. In Kingston’s and, especially, Cather’s narratives, critics do not remark on the incest theme. No one would categorize “No Name Woman” or Sapphira as an incest text, even though in both narratives the incest theme plays a part that is all the more powerful for being submerged. In The Kiss, Harrison presents incest without the cushioning of the riddle narrative, and is excoriated and demonized for it. These models suggest that when it comes to incest, the riddle narrative is the natural form; Western culture is more accustomed to—and more comfortable with—a hidden incest theme.

Finally, I would emphasize that even though The Kiss is the only narrative to receive a lot of controversy, all four of the texts that I explore in this dissertation dramatically subvert the standard incest model, strategically reinventing it for a variety of purposes. Kingston uses the incest theme as a way to claim the right to speak and then as a stepping stone to talk about what is, for her, the real taboo, interracial desire; Cather

uses the unanswered incest riddle in her novel to indict the system of slavery and the way it blinkers those who participate in it; Harrison, by beginning her memoir with a matter-of-fact reference to incest, comments on incest itself—how common it is, how undramatic, unrevelatory, and anticlimactic to its traumatized victims. In this context I would offer one more similarity that these writers share: they are all women. Given that women have traditionally been victims of incest, it seems important to illustrate how Kingston, Cather, and Harrison, in subverting the riddle form, are being subversive in suggesting new ways to narrativize incest, in the process reshaping the way we look at this most ancient of taboos.

## Bibliography

- Allison, Dorothy. "Violence Against Women Begins at Home." Trash. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988. 141-150.
- Barthes, Roland. S/Z. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974 [1970].
- Byatt, A.S. Angels and Insects. New York: Random House, 1992.
- Cather, Willa. Sapphira and the Slave Girl. New York: Vintage, 1940.
- Chinatown. Dir. Roman Polanski. Paramount, 1974.
- Clara's Heart. Dir. Robert Mulligan. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1988.
- Davis, Todd F., and Kenneth Womack. "Forget the Alamo: Reading the Ethics of Style in John Sayles's Lone Star." Moving Pictures, Migrating Identities. Ed. Eva Rueschmann. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2003. 211-26.
- Defoe, Daniel. Moll Flanders. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971.
- Douglas, Mary. Purity and Danger. London: Routledge, 1966.
- Faulkner, William. Absalom, Absalom! New York: Random House, 1964 [1936].
- French, Marilyn. Our Father. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.
- Freud, Sigmund. Dora. New York: Macmillan, 1963.
- Harrison, Kathryn. The Kiss. New York: Random House, 1997.
- . Thicker Than Water. New York: Random House, 1991.
- King, Stephen. Gerald's Game. New York: Signet, 1993.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. The Woman Warrior. New York: Knopf, 1977.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. Structural Anthropology. Trans. Monique Layton. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1976.
- Lone Star. Dir. John Sayles. Columbia Pictures, 1996.
- McCarthy, Cormac. Outer Dark. New York: Vintage, 1968.
- Roiphe, Katie. "Making the Incest Scene." Harper's Nov 1995: 65-71.

Simpson, Mona. "Lawns." The Best American Short Stories 1986. Ed. Raymond Carver. New York: Houghton Mifflin. 258-278.

Smiley, Jane. A Thousand Acres. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991.

Sophocles. Oedipus the King. Trans. David Grene. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1954.

Spillers, Hortense J. "'The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight': In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers." Changing Our Own Words. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989. 127-49.

Tartt, Donna. A Secret History. New York: Ivy Books, 1992.



Table of Contents

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**.....ii

**PREFACE**.....iii

**CHAPTERS**

**I. A STEPPING STONE TO VOICE: THE SHIFTING ANSWERS TO THE FORBIDDEN STORY RIDDLE IN “NO NAME WOMAN”**.....1

    Forbidden Stories.....3

    The Forbidden Secret of “No Name Woman”.....9

    Interracial Desire in “No Name Woman”.....15

    An Odd-Couple Coupling: The Telling of Incest and Miscegenation.....23

    Purity and Pollution: At the Roots of “Incest” and “Miscegenation”.....27

    A Theory of the Intertwining of Incest and Miscegenation.....30

    Saying the Unsayable: The Development of Voice in The Woman Warrior.....31

**II. THE REVELATION OF NO REVELATION: THE UNANSWERED INCEST RIDDLE IN SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL**.....53

    Not Saying Incest.....59

    Incest and the Mulatta.....67

    A Composite Portrait of Black/Blank Womanhood.....71

    The Erasure of Jezebel.....79

    Incest in the Colbert Clan.....96

    The Literary Failure of Sapphira.....98

**III. THE NEW FACE OF INCEST?: RACE, CLASS, AND THE CONTROVERSY OVER KATHRYN HARRISON’S THE KISS**.....106

    Incest, Memoir, Narcissism, Self Plagiarism.....110

    The Incest “Victim of The Kiss.....121

    The New Face of Incest? .....126

**IV. THE DOMESTICATION OF INCEST: KATHRYN HARRISON’S THICKER THAN WATER VS. THE KISS**.....136

Stylistic Differences.....	137
Differences in Plot and Characterization.....	147
Domesticating Incest.....	165
A Turn in the Road: <u>Lone Star</u> and the Revelation That Falls Flat on Its Face.....	171
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>179</b>