

# Failed Futurity

## Performing Abortion in Merrill Denison's *Marsh Hay*

**M**errill Denison's *Marsh Hay* culminates with the “piercing scream” of a pregnant woman named Sarilin Serang as she falls offstage (A39).<sup>1</sup> Originally published in 1923 by a man who was once celebrated as “Canada’s greatest dramatist” (Milne 64), the play was not performed until 1974 and its first professional production did not take place until 1996.<sup>2</sup> This unique delay in production was likely due to the play’s sensitive themes, namely pregnancy out of wedlock and a fall that could be interpreted as intentional or as an accident. Aptly described in the Shaw Festival brochure as “bold and unusual,” *Marsh Hay*’s dramatization of pregnancy loss was repeatedly overlooked by critics in the 1920s, 1970s, and 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Reviewers of the 1974 and 1996 productions focused on the play’s naturalistic language (Portman), portrayal of economic hardship (Whittaker; Chapman), and patriarchal figurehead (Friedlander). Scholars, in turn, have examined the play as a representation of expressionist drama (Garebian), rural poverty (Filewod), and the liberal feminist treatment of unwed mothers (Lindgren). While most critics concentrate on *Marsh Hay*’s dramatization of economic hardship, ultimately, the play’s depiction of rural poverty and pregnancy are mutually constitutive because the end of Sarilin’s pregnancy functions as a symbol and symptom of the Serang family’s continual lack of progress. Sarilin’s fall undoes the possibility of a renewed rural homestead. In *Marsh Hay*, pregnancy loss enacts a failed future.

Through a reconsideration of *Marsh Hay*, I aim to provide a rare public acknowledgement of pregnancy loss and to facilitate a critical discourse that challenges the way female bodies are used as symbols of failure. Psychologists such as Norman Brier attribute the woman’s feelings of self-loss after a lost pregnancy to the absence of “public acknowledgement” and

“rituals to structure mourning and gain support” (451). *Marsh Hay*, then, not only reveals the changing attitudes towards pregnancy out of wedlock in the twentieth century, but also calls attention to the persistent need for a public discourse that acknowledges women’s divergent experiences with pregnancy and that challenges the negative symbolism of pregnancy loss as a failure.

Sarilin’s pregnancy loss effectively dissolves the family unit and with it the potential for a rural community that accepts unwed mothers. The terms “pregnancy loss” or “lost pregnancy” denote multiple causes for the end of a pregnancy—including miscarriage, abortion, stillbirth, and even the death of a pregnant woman—and are especially applicable to *Marsh Hay* because it is ambiguous whether Sarilin miscarries or intentionally ends her pregnancy. The term “pregnancy loss,” however, risks prescribing a narrative of loss and homogenizing women’s diverse experiences of reproduction. While the play gives the audience little indication of Sarilin’s response to the end of her pregnancy, Mrs. Serang suggests that it should be interpreted as a “loss” for the family and rural community. The uncertainty of whether Sarilin’s pregnancy loss was spontaneous or deliberate gestures towards her lack of both agency and interiority in the play. The *Oxford English Dictionary* distinguishes between “miscarriage” and “abortion” in terms of choice: while a miscarriage is “spontaneous” (4a), an abortion is “a deliberate act” (1a). Literary critic Heather Latimer, however, warns against this very type of emphasis on “choice” when defining abortion because “choices,” as Latimer points out, “are always constrained by circumstances,” and Sarilin has very little choice when it comes to her pregnancy (11). Although Sarilin never directly speaks about her pregnancy, other characters suggest that Sarilin should end her pregnancy and blame an accidental fall, which is why I refer to it as an abortion. Regardless of whether the end of the pregnancy is interpreted as intentional, however, my argument still applies: Sarilin’s “fall” underscores her lack of options in 1920s rural Canada, and the pregnancy loss functions as a punishment to the family and community for condemning pregnancy out of wedlock.

*Marsh Hay* is only one example of Canadian theatre’s unexamined fascination with lost pregnancies. This sensitive and traditionally taboo topic is featured in David French’s *Leaving Home* (1972), Margaret Clarke’s *Gertrude and Ophelia* (1993), Djanet Sears’ *Harlem Duet* (1997), Jane Cawthorne’s *Abortion Monologues* (2010), and Catherine Banks’ *It Is Solved by Walking* (2012), among others. These plays use lost pregnancy to perform failed futurity—that is, the failed future of an individual, family, race, culture,

and sometimes even the nation. The term “futurity” expresses the possibility and quality of a future, as theorized by Lee Edelman in *No Future*. Edelman examines the Child as a symbol of a heteronormative temporality that excludes queer identity; in turn, he rejects “the Child as the image of the future” (3) and thereby the “unquestioned value” (4) of futurity. He defines the rhetoric and symbols of “reproductive futurism” as “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity” (2). While Edelman critiques both the use of the Child as a symbol of futurity and the value of futurity itself, I critique the use of pregnancy loss as a public symbol of failed futurity that places blame on the mother. In many literary works and public narratives, an individual woman’s lost pregnancy represents a group’s failure, and this symbolism strips both agency and privacy away from the woman. Canadian literature’s treatment of lost pregnancy presents futurity in heteronormative patriarchal terms that exclude the mother figure from a viable future.<sup>4</sup> In *Marsh Hay*, lost pregnancy foretells the demise not only of an archetypal rural family but also of rural Canada if onstage characters and real audiences do not accept pregnancy out of wedlock. I argue, however, that while *Marsh Hay* dramatizes lost pregnancy as a triple failure—of the maternal, the family, and the rural—it also contains a metacritical commentary on the damaging effects of this very symbolism.

Although the topic of lost pregnancy is generally absent in scholarship on Canadian literature and drama, recent works by Latimer and Sandra Sabatini examine the representation of pregnancy in Canadian and American literature and film.<sup>5</sup> Sabatini provocatively examines the act of *Making Babies* (2003), as her title suggests, in Canadian literature. For Sabatini, “Twentieth-century Canadian fiction portrays the infant according to changing beliefs about the baby’s importance; there is a marked evolution in both quantity and quality of infant representation” (4). The making of “babies,” Sabatini explains, “seems indicative of the mother’s vital engagement with life” (8). The inverse is true of *Marsh Hay* when Denison marks the loss of Sarilin’s pregnancy with the family’s renewed “tragic futility” (A31).

While Sabatini convincingly demonstrates an increasing social acceptance of issues related to motherhood and pregnancy, both Sabatini and Latimer are careful to underscore the limits of this progression when it comes to abortion. Latimer opens her book *Reproductive Acts* (2013) with a critique of recent films, such as *Knocked Up* (2007) and *Juno* (2007), that are about unwanted or unplanned pregnancies but that somehow “sidestep

abortion altogether and still make sense” (6). In examining the rhetoric of reproductive rights in Canadian and American cultural production, Latimer questions how these works reflect “the evolution, and erosion, of reproductive rights in North America” (6). For Latimer, “understanding how the discourse surrounding reproductive politics functions in fiction is an integral part of understanding where reproductive debates stand” (7). Latimer demonstrates how reproductive politics are “cyclical” (5) and “jarringly familiar” (4) in the literature and film from the 1980s to the present day. Turning to the discourses that have surrounded *Marsh Hay* helps to extend her analysis by revealing how the play’s theatre reviews in the 1970s and the 1990s are “jarringly” similar to their antecedents in the 1920s. While Latimer concentrates on Canadian and American works from 1984 to 2006, I focus on one Canadian play and its audience’s increasingly progressive stance on pregnancy out of wedlock in the 1920s, 1970s, and 1990s. Contrary to the audience’s growing acceptance of unwed mothers, *Marsh Hay*’s performance history and reviews also demonstrate the consistent silencing of abortion as reviewers repeatedly “sidestep” the play’s climactic moment of abortion altogether.

### **Canadian Contexts**

Literary treatments of lost pregnancy have changed throughout the major political movements and concerns of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Canada, including literature of settler-invaders, modernism, feminism, Quebec separatism, race and multiculturalism, and sexuality. Early Canadian settler narratives use pregnancy to thematize the fertility of the land, viable crop production, and nation building.<sup>6</sup> Settler narratives, such as Sinclair Ross’s *As For Me and My House* (1941), use pregnancy to indicate the tenuous future of rural Canada: Mrs. Bentley cannot conceive a child with her husband and a local girl dies giving birth; the Bentleys’ infertility and the tragic delivery are just as symbolic of Horizon’s failed future as the false fronts that line the streets of the struggling prairie town. Sabatini points to Ross’s use of a baby as a symbol of “future possibility, some hope that [the Bentleys’] lives are legitimate and meaningful” (57), but she is quick to remind us that the child “will not afford any real or lasting solution” (56). In this novel, lost pregnancy represents a lacking marriage, a stagnating town, and the failed aspirations of a desperate narrator.

Modernist writers, including Gwen Pharis Ringwood and Jessie Georgina Sime, further develop the interiority of the conflicted maternal figure. Sime

uses pregnancy to question whether abortion is really a choice for modern women. In Sime's 1919 short story "Alone," a woman has an abortion in order to keep her job and secret love affair with her employer. In the aftermath of the abortion, the narrator "learned what it means to have small hands at your heart," but explains that "[i]t couldn't be. It was a choice between it and him . . . it couldn't be," and that she "had to lose it" (14). With the abortion comes the failed futurity of the couple as she struggles with the loss of "her baby!" (14) and then with the death of her lover. The negative symbolism of pregnancy loss is pervasive and damaging: it permeates even feminist literature and repeatedly casts the woman as the bearer of failed futures.

While Sime uses pregnancy to question a working woman's sacrifices and to foretell the failed future of a couple, Ringwood dramatizes pregnancy loss in order to examine the future of rural life in Canada. In her 1939 play *Still Stands the House*, Ringwood stages a battle between the rural and the urban as a way of dramatizing the violent opposition to a modern future in Canada. As Moira Day explains, *Still Stands the House* pits "a fertile, loving Ruth" who represents a future of urban possibilities against "Hester as an all-consuming force of stagnation and death" in rural Canada (172). By the play's end, Hester is the only character left standing as she sends the pregnant Ruth out to her death in order for Hester to maintain ownership of her long-standing rural family home. In Ringwood's play, as in Ross's novel, lost pregnancy suggests a futile attempt to break free of Canada's rural past. Denison's *Marsh Hay* participates in this thematization by using pregnancy to represent the failed future of an individual family and rural Canada at large. Where Denison's play distinguishes itself, however, is in its defense of unwed mothers.

*Marsh Hay*'s 1974 premiere was performed in the wake of changes to reproductive rights in Canada and the United States. Canada's Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1968-69 stated that women could receive an abortion as long as it was necessary to the mother's physical or mental health and, in 1973, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that women had a fundamental right to have an abortion and that laws restricting this right were unconstitutional. As Latimer explains, *Roe v. Wade* informed the rhetoric of reproductive rights for decades to come because it considers the mother's and fetus' lives as separate, and "thus set the stage for repetitive, paradoxical debates about the rights of the fetus versus the rights of the woman" (10). In response to arguments on reproductive rights in the 1970s, a surge of authors conflated literal lost pregnancy with a figurative self-loss,

including Margaret Atwood, Audrey Thomas, and Margaret Clarke. Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) focuses on the psychological turmoil of a nameless narrator after an abortion; Thomas' *Mrs. Blood* (1970) reveals the interiority of a woman as she experiences a miscarriage and, as Sabatini explains, "is frustrated by her passivity" (110); and Clarke's *Gertrude and Ophelia* (1987) uses an on-stage abortion to enact Ophelia's fractured self-identity and failed relationship with Hamlet. In these works, pregnancy loss signifies a self-loss. *Marsh Hay*'s premiere comes at a time of continent-wide judicial and artistic discourses on abortion as well as on mothers' complex experiences of pregnancy.

The first professional production of *Marsh Hay* in the 1990s follows the 1988 *Morgentaler v. Regina* case wherein the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the 1968-69 law as unconstitutional and enabled women to have an abortion without any legal restrictions. Coinciding with this legal change, Canadian drama of the 1980s and 1990s uses abortion and miscarriage as powerful political acts and indicators of a struggling culture or race. Works from Black and Indigenous playwrights, like Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* and Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, feature pregnancy as a trope that warns of the faltering futurity of a race and culture. *Harlem Duet*, for example, opens with a discussion of the protagonist's miscarriage and abortion, which function as symbols of the "failure of the nuclear Black family" (Sears, Personal Interview n. pag.). *Dry Lips*, in turn, grapples with "damaged" reproduction in the context of forced Christianity, alcoholism, and residential schools (207). As these examples illustrate, the gradual legalization of abortion in Canada has only cemented the wide use of pregnancy loss as a powerful symbol. While Denison's depiction of abortion and pregnancy out of wedlock was quite radical for 1923, the change to Canadian law in the late 1960s set the stage for *Marsh Hay*'s stage premiere in 1974 and for audiences that would be more accepting of Sarilin's predicament.

### **Marsh Hay**

Denison's *Marsh Hay* offers a unique case study for the treatment and reception of lost pregnancy in the 1920s, 1970s, and 1990s. First published in a collection of four plays entitled *The Unheroic North* (1923), *Marsh Hay* was described by book reviewers as "the most serious and ambitious" play in the collection ("Life and Letters" 22). Despite the positive reviews, *Marsh Hay* did not see the stage until over fifty years later. Unlike Denison's better-known work *Brothers in Arms*, which has become one of the most frequently produced English Canadian plays, *Marsh Hay* has been produced only three

times to date. On March 21, 1974, Richard Plant directed a student production of *Marsh Hay* at Hart House Theatre in Toronto as part of a conference on “Canadian Theatre Before the Sixties.” The Playwrights’ Workshop Montréal staged a production later that same year in honour of Denison’s eighty-first birthday. In 1996, the Shaw Festival mounted the play’s first professional production, directed by Neil Munro.

*Marsh Hay* depicts the rough, impoverished life of an archetypal rural family who have been living, as Mrs. Lena Serang tells us, “from hand to mouth on fifty acres of grey stone” for twenty years (A11). The Serang family—headed by John, the father—includes twelve children, but five of the children have died before the curtain even rises on this play. The family is poor in every sense: they have no money, no time for enjoyment, and no love. Denison shows us a family that has failed to produce viable crops and a viable family: these failures are mutually constitutive. The play’s central conflict concerns the youngest daughter—Sarilin—who has an unplanned pregnancy out of wedlock. Unlike the early-twenty-first-century film heroines that Latimer considers from *Knocked Up* and *Juno*, Denison’s character actually considers abortion. Act Two opens with Tessie advising her younger sister:

TESSIE: (*Speaking inside the room again*) You can do as you like, but I’m tellin you. You’re a fool if you don’t. (*A pause*) Oh. Tell ‘em anything. Tell ‘em you fell. They’d never know. (A32)

The stage direction, “*A pause*,” offers the only real insight we get into Sarilin’s thoughts about her pregnancy: although we cannot hear Sarilin’s side of the conversation, this “*pause*” suggests that Sarilin wants to know what to “Tell ‘em” if she were to have an abortion. As the “*pause*” also indicates, Sarilin is kept offstage for the duration of her pregnancy, and we only hear her “*piercing scream*” before her father discovers that “she fell” (A39). The sudden pregnancy loss is never directly explained and the audience is left to wonder whether it was a miscarriage or abortion. The script, however, suggests that Sarilin intentionally loses her child and takes her older sister’s advice. John later deduces that “Tessie put [Sarilin] up to it” and, showing no grief for the lost pregnancy, says, “she showed pretty good sense, too” (A45).

The “*piercing scream*” (A39) comes in the midst of a battle between Lena (who promises to support Sarilin as a single mother) and all those who oppose “illegitimate” children from unwed mothers (A34). Lena is a strong voice in support of a woman’s right to have a child without getting married, but the townspeople and minister see Sarilin’s unmarried status as nothing



short of blasphemy. Andrew Barnood, a local man of “*some education*” (A16), explains that the minister “consoled [Lena] for havin a daughter steeped in sin and says it was God’s will and that she’d have to bear it as best she could” (A22). The Serang family is vilified as “heathen, the lot of them” (A22). When John Serang tries to force Sarilin to marry, Lena strongly asserts that “[Sarilin] ain’t going to be forced into no marriage” in order to “fit some lawyer’s idea of what is right” (A39). When Barnood objects that “the child will have no name!” Lena convincingly argues that “It’ll have my name, Serang! . . . You’d tie my girl to that [pointing to Sarilin’s lover] for her whole life, for its name?” (A39). Despite Lena’s firm stance and dedication to the baby, Sarilin’s scream interrupts this argument, symbolically announcing Lena’s failure to control Sarilin and to convince the townspeople that a single mother can have a child. The abortion and decline of the family household seem to be a form of punishment for the unchanging attitudes of John Serang and his neighbours despite Lena’s pleas.

Although the play focuses on and culminates with the pregnancy loss, the topic of abortion is largely absent from book reviews of the play’s script in the 1920s and from theatre reviews of the productions in 1974 and even in 1996. *The Globe’s* 1923 review of *Marsh Hay* only alludes to illicit “pitfalls lurking for the adolescent children debarred from any form of normal amusement” (“Life and Letters” 22). Reviews from the 1970s and 1990s tend to focus on the play’s neglected status and its depiction of unrelenting economic despair. Jamie Portman’s and Mira Friedlander’s reviews of the 1996 production discuss the play’s representation of poverty in relation to the economic hardships of Canadian “farmers rooted to their barren soil” (Friedlander n. pag.). Despite her loaded description of “barren” land, Friedlander never mentions the pregnancy. Geoff Chapman’s review goes so far as to mention “teen sex” and the fact that Lena has lost five children but glosses over Sarilin’s pregnancy and abortion (“*Marsh Hay*” J1). Kate Taylor contributes the most nuanced review of the Shaw Festival production. She discusses Sarilin’s pregnancy and the fact that “her boyfriend has been charged with statutory rape” (C1); but even Taylor skips over the play’s climactic dramatization of lost pregnancy, and, perhaps in an effort to avoid spoiling the plot for prospective audiences, explains in general terms that “By the final act, the Serangs have slumped back into despair” (C1).

Scholars have shared the reviewers’ focus on the play’s bleak portrayal of economic hardship. Keith Garebian interprets the play as a depiction of “a rural world of poverty and tribulation” (170), and John Campbell approaches



the play as a dramatization of “the devastating effect that economic hardship can have on family life and on the human spirit” (97). Alan Filewod advances the interpretations of rural poverty in *Marsh Hay* by interrogating the play’s documentary realism and examining Denison’s refusal to offer any solutions. Allana Lindgren stands out as the only critic to provide an extended discussion of motherhood in *Marsh Hay* and argues that the play’s liberal feminist perspective reflects the evolving attitudes towards maternity in Canada.

Building on Lindgren’s pivotal analysis, I argue that Denison’s play not only reflects a growing acceptance of unwed mothers but also reveals the treatment of lost pregnancy as a symbol of failed futurity. A consideration of the play’s interconnection of pregnancy and futurity reveals the limits of Denison’s progressive maternal figure and her conceptions of pregnancy out of wedlock. In short, Denison’s progressive representation of maternity is constrained by the play’s use of abortion as a punishment for the community’s refusal to accept pregnancy out of wedlock.

### **The Spectral Maternal**

In *Marsh Hay*, it is not merely pregnancy but also maternal identity that define the family’s future. During her pregnancy, Sarilin remains offstage and it is her mother, Lena, who transforms into an ideal maternal figure. Lena becomes a loving, independent, and strong woman whose internal transformation converts the neglected house into a welcoming home. The stage directions for the second act’s opening scene highlight this corresponding spatial change through Denison’s use of pathetic fallacy:

*The kitchen of the Serang home has altered entirely in its atmosphere. Where before was a feeling of extreme squalor, poverty, tragic futility, there is a feeling of regeneration. The place lacked self respect before. The curtains on the windows; the kept, black look of the stove; the red table cloth on the table, piled high with dirty dishes before, and the tin can covered with birch bark and the geranium it holds, all echo the evident attempt to make the place decent to live in. (A31)*

Lena singlehandedly transforms the house, creates a plan for the family’s financial future, and distinguishes herself as the protecting mother figure who insists that the “baby is goin to be born into the world with the best chancet [*sic*] I can give it” (A39). The presence of this bright, hopeful maternal image, however, only compounds its eventual absence, and the stage is haunted by its loss. The scene immediately following Sarilin’s abortion opens on the shambles of the family home, which “*has sunk back into its old dilapidation*” (A41), in the wake of the lost pregnancy and the decline of the ideal maternal figure.

In her brief role as the ideal maternal figure, Lena becomes the political voice of the play and argues that an unwed mother should not feel ashamed—a belief that was quite radical in the early 1920s. Lindgren, for instance, explains that in 1920 the Ontario Mother's Allowance was only given to "worthy" single mothers and that the 1921 Legitimation Act decreed that children could become legitimate only if their parents married (41). *Marsh Hay* reflects these laws as the Serang family's minister, neighbours, and townspeople all cast Sarilin as a "disgrace" (A33). Lena, by contrast, challenges the shame of illegitimacy: "I ain't ashamed, anyways. And Sarilin ain't goin to be ashamed neither. . . . She's goin to want her baby and be proud" (A37). Ironically, only an ideal (conventional) mother can advocate a progressive position on unconventional motherhood within the context of the play; and the unwed mother has no voice.<sup>7</sup> Lena's political progressiveness, however, is limited to the issue of childbirth out of wedlock, and she does not seem to consider abortion as an option when she says that her daughter will "want her baby and be proud" (A37).

Lena's politics are informed by a mysterious "city woman" who suffered a flat tire just outside of the Serang family home and spoke to Lena about Sarilin's situation: "she said it was natural . . . she told me people is ruled by laws . . . just like a tree is . . . and she says no one was to blame" (A34). The city woman inspires Lena's transformation from negligent to supportive mother figure as she realizes that "to call a baby illegitimate . . . was an awful thing" (A34). Although we never see the mysterious city woman, her morals and radical speeches, as retold by Lena, echo the writings of Denison's mother, who was a leading figure of the Canadian suffrage movement and who died shortly before Denison wrote this play. Denison himself was the president of the University of Toronto's Men's League for Women's Suffrage in Canada. In conversations with Plant (the director of *Marsh Hay*'s first production), Denison explained that his mother was the inspiration for the city woman's visit. She too had once experienced a flat tire outside of a farmhouse in Ottawa (Lindgren 42, 51). Denison even dedicated *Unheroic North*—the collection of plays that first contained *Marsh Hay*—to his mother. The city woman, however, never appears onstage, and Lena as the promising maternal figure quickly reverts back to her neglectful ways when Sarilin is no longer pregnant.

With the off-stage role of the city woman and the quick loss of the ideal maternal figure, *Marsh Hay* depicts an archetype in Canadian literature: the spectral maternal or the figurative ghost of a woman's maternal identity after a pregnancy loss. A woman's identity as a mother is not publicly

carried out when she has an abortion or miscarriage, despite any private self-identifications. As a result, the maternal identity and relationship to the unborn child can exist as a phantom that haunts her. While Cynthia Sugars and Marlene Goldman, among others, have made a convincing case for the prevalence of literal ghosts in Canadian literature, one of the recurring figurative ghosts in Canadian drama is not simply the mother figure but the unrealized maternal self. In *Marsh Hay*, the presence of the spectral maternal is compounded by Lena and Sarilin: while Lena acts as the spectral ideal maternal figure, Sarilin's physical absence performs a kind of spectral haunting of the stage. Lena has borne twelve children and lost five. She identifies as the protective mother and transforms into a stand-in maternal figure for Sarilin's pregnancy. The end of Sarilin's pregnancy, as a result, marks the loss of Lena as the ideal maternal figure. The stage is haunted by what could have been: Sarilin's and Lena's unrealized maternal identities represent the Serang family's unrealized future.

In Denison's play, lost pregnancy and the spectral maternal symbolize a traditional Canadian town's inability to change their perspectives on family values. After Sarilin's piercing scream, the play ends with the Serang family home once again in disarray and dysfunction, as well as with a "dishevelled" Lena whose "*valiant air [is] completely gone*" (A41)—a symbolic ending that warns of Canada's future if it fails to change its social values. By the play's end, there is no hope; Denison reveals to us a failed futurity, or what Edelman describes as a future that "is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past" (31). I argue that lost pregnancy is key to the play's political messages because it symbolizes the threat to Canadian families and, by extension, to the nation's viable future if the audience does not work to understand and accept the needs of young women and unwed mothers.

### **Lost Pregnancy as Lost Futurity**

Sarilin's pregnancy is the lynchpin of the family's future: no baby, no future. Although Denison's acceptance of pregnancy out of wedlock challenged popular understandings of the familial unit in 1923, his use of pregnancy as a symbol of a larger community or nation was in keeping with federal teachings on parenthood at the time. In early-twentieth-century Canada, federal educational material—or *Blue Books*—written by the first director of the Department of Health's Division of Child Welfare, Dr. Helen MacMurchy, offered advice on parenthood with the goal of helping families create a "normal home" (7).<sup>8</sup> As Lindgren points out, the *Blue Books* help

to explain Denison's literary use of pregnancy as a symbol of the nation when they assert that "[c]hildren are the security of the home and the nation" (MacMurchy 7). MacMurchy goes so far as to address the "Canadian Mother" as one of "the Makers of Canada" (5). MacMurchy, Lindgren asserts, "stressed that motherhood was a national duty," and "[s]he reinforced this longstanding belief in her *Blue Books*" (37). In fact, the *Blue Books* equate children with the nation as well as with futurity: "When children come you know that your home will not pass away with your generation. It will last for another generation" (MacMurchy 7). *Marsh Hay* similarly uses pregnancy as a symbol of futurity: lost pregnancy is not only about the loss of a baby, it's about the failure to change individual, familial, and national understandings of motherhood. *Marsh Hay* participates in the idea that the child is the benefactor of a larger community by using an abortion to foretell the failed future of the archetypal rural Canadian family. Or, as MacMurchy warns in *The Canadian Mother's Book*, "No Baby—No Nation" (8).

Despite the play's conservative deployment of abortion as a trope of societal failure, *Marsh Hay* also offers a subtle metacritical perspective that challenges the negative symbolism of pregnancy loss. While Lena's response to her daughter's unplanned pregnancy was quite radical in 1923, she fails to discuss abortion and only takes a stand on childbirth out of wedlock. Lena does not challenge social perceptions of unwanted or lost pregnancies; she challenges social perceptions of unwed mothers. While theatre reviewers from the 1974 and 1996 productions generally celebrate the play's "merciless" depiction of "social disapproval and male hypocrisy," the issue of female hypocrisy and Lena's inability (or unwillingness?) to consider abortion is not addressed (Portman 1). Lindgren convincingly argues that there is an increased acceptance of Sarilin's unmarried status when comparing the 1920s reviews of the play to the reviews of the 1970s and 1990s. Sabatini supports Lindgren's findings when she argues that "the taint of unwed motherhood begins to fade" in "books by male and female writers in the 1960s and '70s" (9). *Marsh Hay's* portrayal of the end of a pregnancy, however, remains under-examined. Herbert Whittaker's review of the 1974 production condones the "free-thinking visitor" who "converts the wife to inspired maternalism" but does not address the limits to Lena's "maternalism" and sees Sarilin only as a passive victim who is "seduced by a local lout" (31).

*Marsh Hay's* representation of Sarilin's fall challenges gender roles and beliefs about unwed pregnant mothers. The play undermines Lena as the ideal maternal figure and critiques the characters' use of Sarilin's pregnancy

as a vehicle for their own agenda. After all, Lena does not consider Sarilin's desires or even give her a choice. In short, the play offers an underlying metacritical commentary about the significance of pregnancy as a public symbol. Firstly, none of the characters ask what Sarilin wants, and in this way, the play reveals the characters' primary concern for their own agenda: Lena advocates pregnancy out of wedlock; John promotes marriage; and the townspeople demonize adolescent promiscuity. Secondly, the physical absence of the pregnant Sarilin onstage calls attention to the absence of the mother-to-be's voice and agency. Thirdly, Lena's brief role as the ideal maternal figure is flawed because she tries to impose her beliefs onto Sarilin. Lena insists that "Sarilin'll want her baby" at the same time that we hear Sarilin's "piercing scream" at the loss of the pregnancy (A39); these overlapping lines dramatize Lena's inability to force her own beliefs on Sarilin. Through the off-stage scream, Sarilin asserts her final decision in the matter. Lastly, Lena fails to consider the extent of the city woman's radical beliefs. Lena explains that the city woman "told me a baby that wasn't wanted by its mother ought never to be born" (A39). Lena interprets this to mean that Sarilin must want her child in order to give it legitimacy, but the city woman's advice also advocates the rights of the mother. After all, the city woman's assertion that a baby "ought never to be born" could be interpreted to support Sarilin's abortion.

The fact that the characters are not terribly likeable is a key element in the play's critique of pregnancy as a political symbol because it fosters an audience's critical distance from both John's view that a mother should be married and from Lena's insistence that Sarilin must keep her child. All the characters are "equally unlikeable," as Filewod points out, and Lena's dramatic transformation into a maternal ideal only makes her regression that much more disappointing (74). Frederick Philip Grove's reaction to the play in 1925 similarly describes *Marsh Hay* as a "powerful picture" but mourns its lack of "redeeming" characters (237). In 1923, a reviewer of *Marsh Hay* says, "There are few heroics in this play" ("Books"); I would add that there are no heroes. Even Lena refuses to consider Sarilin's desires and she cannot force Sarilin to "want her baby" (A39). *Marsh Hay*, then, offers a social critique that extends beyond illegitimate pregnancies to include the use of pregnancy as a symbol.

*Marsh Hay* offers a subtle critique of pregnancy as a symbol for other characters' political views on marriage and religion, but it does not go so far as to celebrate Sarilin or her decision. Denison casts Sarilin as the philandering teen and the play ends in the same way that Act One concludes: with Sarilin sneaking out of the house to meet a lover. Filewod and Lindgren adeptly

interpret this scene as a sign of the family's cycle of tragedy and of Sarilin's destructive behaviour. As a result of the characters' self-imposed stagnation, the repetition of the messy homestead, tumultuous family, and rebellious daughter elicit reviewers' exasperation rather than their sympathy. Chapman's review of the 1996 production complains, "[John] Serang, constantly whining about 20 years of profitless toil, can't shake off his boorish patriarchal role and eventually the cycle of despair is renewed" ("Brutish" B3). The final tableau's repetition of youthful rebellion and of the house's disarray marks the family's and the town's failure to accept the city woman's teachings. The end of the play begs for change: a change to the family's poverty, a change to John's patriarchal self-destruction, and a change to the society's views on pregnancy out of wedlock. This conclusion, despite the metacritical commentary on the use of pregnancy as a symbol, upholds, in Edelman's words, a "pro-procreative ideology" that "if there is a baby, there is a future" (12-13). "If, however, there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*," Edelman explains, "the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments" (13, emphasis original). This pronatal logic befalls *Marsh Hay* because the play ends with Sarilin's non-reproductive sexual enjoyments, which make her one of the targets of blame for the family's cycle of despair. *Marsh Hay*, however, also places blame on the community for not accepting an unwed mother and for thereby perpetuating the lack of progress.

Pregnancy loss is the tipping point of Denison's *Marsh Hay*, as it is with so many other Canadian plays such as Clarke's *Gertrude and Ophelia* and Sears' *Harlem Duet*, but the topic of abortion is conspicuously absent in the plays' scholarly criticism and theatre reviews. As Latimer explains, "reproductive politics continue to be so recursive" (4) precisely because abortion remains a "dirty word" (4). While *Marsh Hay*'s performance history demonstrates the evolving attitudes towards pregnancy out of wedlock, abortion continues to be a taboo issue in the play's theatre reviews from the 1920s to the 1990s. It is my hope that we can begin to discuss the impact and problematic literary symbolism of lost pregnancies, and in doing so, foster a much-needed open discourse on the prescribed female silence on an issue that affects so many women of the past, present, and future.

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## NOTES

- 1 All citations of *Marsh Hay* are from the 1974 edition because it coincides with the first performances, includes visual depictions of scenes, and offers an introduction that speaks to the play's delayed performance history.
- 2 *Marsh Hay*'s 1974 premiere production was performed by the University of Toronto's Graduate Drama Centre, directed by Richard Plant with set design by Marlon Walker and costumes by Linda Hardy. Neil Munro directed the 1996 Shaw Festival production, which starred Elizabeth Inksetter (Sarilin), Corrine Koslo (Lena), and Norman Browning/Michael Ball (John); set design by Peter Hartwell and lighting by Robert Thomson.
- 3 Alan Filewod's "American mug, Canadian wump" offers more information on the Shaw Festival production.
- 4 Karen Weingarten's *Abortion in the American Imagination* (2014) argues that American literature uses "antiabortion rhetoric . . . to delineate the contours of the ideal American citizen" (2).
- 5 The issue of reproduction in American literature has garnered more critical attention than in its Canadian counterpart: see Karen Bender and Nina Gramont's *Choice: True Stories of Birth, Contraception, Infertility, Adoption, Single Parenthood, and Abortion* (2007); Beth Capo's *Textual Contraception: Birth Control and Modern American Fiction* (2007); and Aimee Wilson's *Conceived in Modernism: The Aesthetics and Politics of Birth Control* (2016).
- 6 For a discussion of pregnancy among female settlers in Canada, see Carol Fairbanks' *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction* (1986).
- 7 Thank you to Brendan McCormack for pointing out the ironic dynamic between conventional and unconventional mothers in this play.
- 8 Lindgren provides an in-depth account of the federal treatment of motherhood in early-twentieth-century Canada with reference to the *Blue Books*.

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