If we were to assemble a canon of Canadian texts based on their ability to help Canadians live better lives, we would do well to include Sinclair Ross’ *As For Me and My House* as one of its core texts. The text is not simply “prairie lit”; it actually speaks to the concerns of most contemporary Canadians. The text’s narrator, Mrs. Bentley, often expresses in her journal her fear that she lives in a threatening environment, yet she ultimately portrays her environment as more secure than insecure. It is in fact inspiring—the various pressing threats are manipulated so they actually empower her. And for the reader, the reading experience would not be anywhere near as claustrophobic and uncomfortable as we might assume it to be, given her frequent complaints of Horizon’s horrors. The text in fact often feels spacious, roomy, and offers the reader pleasing variety, and ultimately serves as a place to settle in awhile while we learn to make our re-engagement with the real world more purposeful and legitimate.

After 9-11, even literary critics have been left considering whether we might now more exist within a concurrent, traumatic world than we do a postmodern one. But even before 9-11 made the world seem so threatening, Canadians well knew what it was to feel threatened by their surroundings, for if psychohistorians such as Lloyd DeMause are correct, throughout history most people have not received sufficient support from their caretakers—specifically, from their mothers—to be empowered to feel otherwise. He believes most people are prone to imagine the world as a threatening place, for most of us learn early on that to be apart from our mothers, to belong to a world outside of her near environment, means feeling abandoned and alone. The reason separation comes to seem so threatening owes to most of us not having mothers themselves loved and cared for enough to be accepting when we turn away from them and focus mostly on our own concerns. Instead, our departure is experienced as us abandoning them—as a deliberate, neglectful act, that is—and they retaliate in kind: they withdraw their love and support, to our psychic devastation. The result, as Joseph Rheingold explains, is a perpetual fear of death:

*Basically, it is generally agreed, separation means separation from the mother. It may hold no connotation of punishment, but its more significant meaning is desertion by the mother. Although in infancy the mere absence of the*
mother is a threat to survival, separation becomes associated with purpose, that is, with abandonment. Death is equated with willful withdrawal of the mother. Separation anxiety seems to be universal and is a major source of death anxiety throughout life. (17)

As a psychoanalyst Rheingold devotes himself to assisting patients feel less overcome with death anxiety. He believes his profession empowers him to help, for “[t]here is no more powerful corrective force than the ‘good-mother’ protectiveness of the therapist” (227). But perhaps even if not as good, texts—that is, alternative worlds, traumatized, abandoned readers might immerse themselves in—also function as a powerful corrective force, by provisioning readers with some of the security they need to live healthy, non-doistered, lives.

Psychologists and literary theorists are developing an increasing respect for the importance of texts as therapeutic aids, with most discussion now not on whether or not they may ease suffering but on which sorts of texts are most helpful (Vickroy 12). Though the study of reader immersion has “not been particularly popular with the ‘textual’ brands of literary theory” (15) as “it conflicts with [their] [. . .] concept of language” (92), reader-response literary theorists and cognitive psychologists who study readers’ involvement in texts generally agree that reading involves the reader in “creating” a world that “stretch[es] in space, exist[s] in time” (Gerrig 15). The cognitive psychologist Richard Gerrig argues that the text actually “serve[s] as [a] habitat” (15) for the reader, that readers are “placed” within it as “side-participants or overhearsers” (119). He does not believe that “transportation into a narrative world is dependent on narrative skills” (95), but surely not all texts draw readers in equally. We know that realist texts were once accused of evoking emotional responses to an unprecedented degree, and it may be that modernist texts, though sometimes imagined as implacable, as deliberately designed to actually refuse the reader (even if only to drive some select few of them to pursue on to greater depths), are potentially even more involving than realist fiction is. According to Norman Cantor, “the burden of the modernist novel [is actually the] [. . .] existential discovery of a deeper, mythic, more human self” (53); it “does contain a story, which may be by turns elaborate and minimal, but it serves only as a vehicle for the exploration of sensibility on the part of the author, which helps the reader to discover him—or herself” (53). If Cantor is correct that texts which explore an author’s sensibility can lead the reader to profound personal discoveries, then As For Me and My House, which is all about the exploration
of the psychic/emotional life of Mrs. Bentley as she explores her new habitat, Horizon, might be an especially immersive text for the reader to inhabit. However, if readers are likely to share Mrs. Bentley’s “process of locating and displacing herself” (Kroetsch 217) in Horizon, if they are thereby drawn to vicariously experience her own emotional response to her environment, how, if they are indeed insecure, could they possibly be thought to benefit from being introduced—like this?:

It’s an immense night out there, wheeling and windy. The lights on the street and in the houses are helpless against the black wetness, little unilluminating glints that might be painted on it. The town seems huddled together, cowering on a high, tiny perch, afraid to move lest it topple into the wind. Close to the parsonage is the church, black even against the darkness, towering ominously up through the night and merging with it. There’s a soft steady swish of rain on the roof, and a gurgle of eavestroughs running over. Above, in the high cold night, the wind goes swinging past, indifferent, liplessly mournful. It frightens me, makes me feel lost, dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned. I wish Philip would waken. (8)

We should note that insecure readers (i.e., those who experienced feelings of maternal abandonment) would be especially affected by this description, as they would be the ones to lend themselves most to it. As Bessel Van der Kolk writes: “Many traumatized people expose themselves, seemingly compulsively, to situations reminiscent of the original trauma.” (389). But if this passage merely satisfied a reader’s repetition compulsion, little good would come of it, for though “Freud thought that the aim of repetition was to gain mastery, […] clinical experience has shown that this rarely happens” (Van der Kolk 389). But though it begins and consistently throughout arouses readers’ fears and anxieties, As For Me and My House ultimately does more assuage than pointlessly recall and revisit them.

The nighttime environment has readers share Mrs. Bentley’s harrowing vulnerability, but there are those about whose company can help them feel at ease. Readers might indeed be looking to find sanctuary within a maternal environment, for as Rheingold argues, fears of abandonment “motivate the wish to return to the uterus” (18), to the empowered mother, and they find someone aptly suited to safeguard them in Mrs. Finley. They encounter her immediately after hearing of Mrs. Bentley’s fearful nighttime experience, and it is doubtful whether she could have been
made to seem more its perfect counter. The night could make the houses “helpless,” but it is hard to imagine it doing likewise with Mrs. Finley, for she is “austere” (8) and forceful. The night sky could make the town powerless, to be “afraid to move lest it topple into the wind.” Hardly fearful, she is instead the town’s “leader,” with a “crusading steel in her eye [which] [. . .] warns she brooks no halfway measures” (8), and with a “hand that never falters” (9). The night sky blankets the “little” town, but since she “manages the town [. . .] [and] makes it over in her own image” (8), she too keeps the town under wraps.

More than someone who is “self-important” (185), as the scholar Frank Davey understands her, she *is* important to the town: there is no indication that she is anything less than its leading matriarch. “[S]elf-assumed” (8), but alone as its head, nevertheless. But she may indeed overall strike us as less someone who is distinct and particular than as someone who is simply another member of the matronly mass that rules Horizon. Mrs. Bentley tells us that “Mrs. Finley and her kind are the proverbial stone walls against which unimportant heads like [hers] are knocked in vain” (17), making her seem fated to be as casually managed by them as their husbands already are—to become like Mrs. Finley’s “meek little man” (9) of a husband, who exists with a “cage drawn over him” (9), or like Mrs Lawson’s, whose life is akin to that of “a plodding Clyde” “managed [by] [. . .] a yelping little terrier” (27). That is, though she is made to seem someone who would safeguard Mrs. Bentley (and the insecure reader), she is also someone who could command from her her own self-command and individuated status; an affliction those who out of fear seek refuge with the maternal can only expect (Rheingold 17).

Because Mrs. Finley is made to seem part of a matronly mass which not only rules but define the town’s space, she also threatens upon the reader their envelopment. That is, though Robert Kroetsch’s argument that to be “in” Horizon is to be within a “feminine” “space” (“The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction” 114) has proven influential, readers nevertheless more experience Horizon as maternal and matronly than as feminine. Most of the women in the novel, we note, are described as portly—we are to think of them quite literally as a surround. This would be something we would notice in any case, but the text begins so that we are cued to take in Mrs. Wenderby’s “portliness” (5). For just before being told of her rotundity, we were told she came by to “size [the Bentley’s] [. . .] up and see how much [they] [. . .] own” (5); no doubt, that is, we reciprocate, and size her up as well. We are subsequently told of how “[t]he town seem[ed] huddled together,” which has us
thinking of its structures as bodily conjoined. And emerging from the huddle is the town’s most distinctive and important structure—the church, a structure described to seem a maternal, birthing, womb-like structure. Though Helen Buss believes that the church, which is “black even against the darkness, towering ominously up through the night and merging with it,” is dearly a patriarchal structure (196), for insecure readers whose defining experience of abandonment is associated with the maternal, the fact that it merges with the abandoning nighttime environment works against it being thought of in this way. And while it is true that linear height is at times associated with masculinity in the text—his looming height probably helps make Mr. Bentley seem resolute and manly, for instance—at this point in the text masculinity is more dearly associated with squareness than with linearity—we understand, for example, that though linear Main Street is presided over by “Main Street hostess[es]” (9), no such claim is made upon Mr. Bentley’s “stalwart, four-square, Christian sermon” (7).

Triangles, however—which suggest the birthing body, with its emphasis on lower girth—are initially made to seem maternal, and the next substantive description of the church has it likened to a vast triangular structure—one which births. That is, when she describes her own home for us in her third journal entry, Mrs. Bentley describes its relation to the church so that the church seems akin to a birthing mother. She says, “It’s a small, squat, grayish house, and pushed up against the big, glum, grayish church it looks so diminutive that [she’s] […] reminded of the mountain that did all the fussing and gave birth to a mouse” (18-19). The church has already been made to seem as if possessed of matrons for innards, for when the church congregation is described we hear only of the “women in their humdrum forties” (14), and when the church choir is described, we learn that it too is composed of “matrons, middle aged and on” (15). The delineation of another triangular, wide-hipped “entity” follows immediately afterwards in the text. We meet Mrs. Ellington, and learn that she is a “large, Norwegian woman, in shape and structure rather like a snowman made of three balls piled on top of one another” (19), and that “[h]er broad red face is buttoned down like a cushion in the middle with a nose so small that in profile it’s invisible” (19). Her nose is to her face as Mrs. Bentley’s house is to the church: both are tiny or near invisible in comparison to the more relevant structure. In addition, we are also told that Mrs. Ellington’s home houses “boarders and chickens” (19). Hens seem more maternal than chickens, but since we are told their eggs are brought over to the Bentleys for dinner, they are made to seem maternal
The environment *As For Me and My House* affords the reader, then, faces them with the drawbacks of seeking an escape to a maternal fold out of fear of an abandoning world; and, indeed, Mrs. Bentley repeatedly complains of how living in Horizon means to live in a domineering and smothering environment. Her journal in fact begins with evidence that the Bentleys do become like the matrons’ husbands in their doing as directed. We find Mr. Bentley hard at work “putting up stovepipes and opening crates” (5). He is poor at this sort of work, but he does it because the matrons expect him to be the one who “get[s] up on the roof and put[s] a few new shingles on” (8). Mrs. Finley is not to be fiddled with; the Bentleys “defer” (10) to her, and accept that survival will mean adapting themselves so they serve the matrons’ needs rather more than their own: “I’m afraid it [i.e., Mrs. Finley’s crusading intent to shape all ‘in her own image’] may mean some changes for Philip and me too” (8). It means that they will have to show they have the needs of the community foremost in mind, exactly the position children are placed in in regards to their immature mothers. And we note how in Mrs. Finley’s presence Mrs. Bentley can become girl-like: Finley “sent [her] [. . .] fiddling with [her] [. . .] apron like a little girl” (8). If they act the way they want, Horizon will notice and disapprove. So since Mrs. Bentley knows that Mrs. Finley and her kind would disapprove if she associated too closely with Judith, even though she would really like to become more familiar with her she concludes that she “will have to be friends with Judith warily” (8). And in the same passage, she also hurries her journey home, out of a fear that Horizon will be reminding [them] [. . .] of [their] [. . .] extravagance” (17) should they see “two lamps burning” late at night.

But if readers feel inadequate, if they feel insecure, if they feel unattended to, alone, abandoned, they will enjoy knowing that the person they are most likely to identity and associate with—Mrs. Bentley—is fussied over as much as she in fact is in the text. For equally evident in the text as the matrons’ command over her is, is the great interest they take in her. She dearly matters to them. We are told that Mrs. Bentley is in fact understood *mostly* as a valued commodity, for associating with the minister’s wife means elevating one’s status in the town (58). Respect for her high value is apparent right from the start: we are told that Mrs. Finley “must have spent hours preparing for [them] [. . .], cleaning her house, polishing her cut glass and silver” (9). Of course, the attendance Horizon provides is frequently made to seem mean-spirited and hostile, however subtly worked in, but Mrs. Bentley herself admits that a hostile environment is to be preferred to an indifferent one—and the reader
might well share her preference. In regards to a different environment—the wilderness—she says, “The stillness and solitude—we think a force or presence into it—even a hostile presence, deliberate, aligned against us—for we dare not admit an indifferent wilderness, where we have no meaning at all” (131). And we note a hostile environment actually has its use, for it can enable the expression of what might otherwise remain kept-in rage. Rheingold argues that those who’ve experienced maternal neglect are usually loath to express their anger at their mothers, that “child[ren] fear the consequences of not loving the mother or of bearing her animosity” (200). “The child is enjoined to show love for the mother, and failure to do so carries a threat, for the child must protect the mother’s defenses against her perception, and the perception by others, of her lack of motherly feeling or her hostile impulses. One must love his mother, or perish, or at least suffer guilt” (201). So it is indirect—Mrs. Bentley never vents her anger at mothers, specifically—but the reader does often experience her fearlessly and forcefully expressing her anger at what the reader has been primed to consider actually mostly a maternal environment—Horizon. They experience, for instance, her desire for the wind to “work its will” (57) and destroy the town, for “[her] [. . .] fingers itch to smudge it out” (92), for her husband’s “fingers on the town’s throat, smiling exactly the same way” (95), and for her piano playing to be “charged’” “to the town’s complete annihilation” (18).

Though not as gruesomely nor as violently, she does still yet express her irritation and disdain for the town’s matrons as well; and when she does, she seems much more the risible adolescent fed up with limits than she does the small child defaulted to fiddling with her clothes. And in these instances she most definitely evidences her need that “adults will help keep [her] [. . .] anger, greed, frustration, and other negative emotions in check” (224), a need the child psychiatrist Stanley Greenspan argues we all needed to have satisfied when we were young, but may have missed out on. If readers missed out on such attendance they might enjoy both vicariously participating in her expression of rage and in sharing her having her more truant behavior kept in check. At times Mrs. Bentley describes her truancy so we sense her desire to be caught out and reprimanded for it. One description in particular could not make her more seem an adolescent concerned to provoke a reigning-in from parents—specifically, when she describes how she allowed “grizzled, dirty-looking men” (103) to give her a ride back home. We note she could have had them drop her off before she reached town, but preferred to see if she could sneak into “Main Street unobserved” (103). Of course, she ends up finding herself “tongue[-tied]” and
“helpless” (103) before the matrons. She pretends to have hoped to have avoided
such a fate, but nowhere else does she more seem the unreliable narrator than here:
that is, since throughout the text she describes how Horizon’s eyes are forever
watching her, it is difficult for us to believe she didn’t expect to have her mischief
noticed, even punished.

Smothering, too, is something Mrs. Bentley must endure. Over and over again
we hear of how her surroundings press down upon her. We note that when she
wants to convey her claustrophobia, she does so by writing tightly packed sentences—
one with dumped adjective or noun dusters. Her house was originally described to
us as “a small, squat, grayish house [. . .] pushed up against the big, glum, grayish
church”: the adjective dusters help convey the smothering proximity of the structures.
This description occurs in her third journal entry, an entry that makes clear why her
house is so depressing, why it provides little privacy from onlookers, and this entry,
in particular, is filled with these dusters. We hear of “insistent little bright pink roses
that stare at you like eyes” (17), of a smell which is “not just a bad, aggressive smell,
just a passive, dingy one,” of “faded old carpets, trying the hard, leather easy chairs
with broken springs” (18), and of heat that is “dense, rigid” (110), “dense, sickly”
(114), and “dense, dotted” (150). And it is no wonder she wants to flee the “hot,
dry, dusty little cupboard of a house” (93), for when words are “jam[med] [. . .] up so
close” (56) together we feel how her living in it means being pinched within a “vice”
(21).

But contrary to the opinion of literary critics such as David Stouck who believe
that Mrs. Bentley’s “narration” is “claustrophobic” (103), most readers likely overall
experience her journal as more spacious than tight. Helen Buss understands Mrs.
Bentley’s “abandon[ment] [. . .] of the structured, practiced world of the pianist for
the ‘longer, looser mode’ of the diarist” (193), as an effective means for her to feel less
constrained. But we should note that the diary is composed of many Augustan
sentences, and that they too assist the text in feeling less cramped, for they make
sentences feel girded. She writes that her and her husband’s “muscles and lungs
seem[ed] pitted to keep the walls from caving in” (97). The key words in this
sentence—“muscles,” “lungs,” pitted,” “keep,” “walls”—are evenly spaced apart, and
may indeed be experienced by readers as if they are support columns within the
textual world that keep it from caving in. In the same passage she declares that “[t]he
wind and the sawing eaves and the rattle of windows have made the house a cell”
(97): yet again she spaces the pressing subjects so that the sentences feels more a
sturdily constructed and roomy house than a tight cell. Often, however, her diary is written as if she experiences her everyday world casually, non-chalantly. We get, for instance, “We had eggs and bread and butter and tea, and a spoonful of honey for Steve” (7), and “[m]y peas and radishes are coming through. I spent a long time up and down the rows this morning, dreading away the dust that was drifted over them; and at intervals, so that I wouldn’t attract too much attention” (89), and “Philip needs shoes and a hat. His Sunday suit is going at the cuffs again, and it’s shiny at the seat and knees” (53). This is pedestrian subject matter presented to us in a routine, everyday fashion.

Rather than rushed and packed, then, many of the sentences are lengthy and unhurried. Both sorts of sentences may however combine with all the repeated sorts of imagery to make the text feel of pleasing variety: it may make the overall read a satisfying window-shopping experience akin to the sort of experience Mrs. Bentley might have enjoyed at Christmas had it not reminded her of her poverty (194). We encounter a pleasing variety of different mythic pantheons (Greek, Christian, Nordic, Gothic), for example. Soil, earth, and metal imagery are put to various and interesting use as well. I have already suggested that shapes affect our phenomenological appreciation of the text, and so too colors—indeed, she showcases them, makes them seem clue-laden. We likely sense that something of Judith’s oddness has to do with her “queer white skin” (211), that something important lies behind Mr. Bentley’s decision (in regards to the choice of color for Steve’s coat) to “cast his vote for blue” (53), that Paul’s “bright red spotted handerchief” is surely what lends him his “histrionic dash” (53), that El Greco’s “green and shin[y]” (169) eyes are what make him seem wolf-like, and that Mrs. Holly’s “green, freshly-laundered dress, and [. . .] green ribbon” (35) is what makes Mrs. Bentley green with envy—“with clothes like that I might be just as attractive” (35).

As Buss notes, there is a terrific play with imagery as Mrs. Bentley experiments here and there with the potential the “words of her diary offer her” (198) to counter oppression and liberate herself. She believes that Mrs. Bentley, “given [. . .] only the narrow private world in which to exercise her creativity, uses what she has, in the way a male artist might use the larger world at his disposal, as material for the realization of the self” (198). But if those psychologists who argue that children of immature mothers end up inhibiting their participation in the world for fear of evoking memories of maternal disapproval are correct, readers need not be hemmed-in women to enjoy Mrs. Bentley’s use of whatever handy to enfranchise herself. But
before delineating how she subverts imagery to do so, it is worth noting that as the
journal writer, as the tale-teller, she is in a position to empower herself over her
readers—and certain sections in particular do read as if she crafted them with an
awareness of her position over them foremost in mind.

Though I maintain that the text is less tight and dense than some critics assume
readers experience it, she still does at times get the reader to tighten up. She will
intentionally switch from evenly spaced to tighter phrasing for this purpose. For
instance, she follows telling us how “[t]he sun through the dust looks big and red
and close” (96), by informing us that it is “[b]igger, redder, closer every day” (96): she
helps ensure that we too are more likely to experience “a doomed feeling, [to fear]
that there is no escape” (96). Like Percy Shelley, she at times co-opts the will of the
wind to make us experience how it’s affecting her, especially when she tells us that:

Sometimes it sinks a little, as if spent and out of breadth, then comes high,
shrill and importunate again. Sometimes it’s blustering and rough, sometimes
silent and sustained. Sometimes it’s wind, sometimes frightened hands that
shake the doors and windows. (52)

We, too, are encouraged to consider the wind “nerve-wracking” (52), but it was
the delineation of the wind’s characteristics, her power over us as journal writer, which
ultimately rattled our nerves. But though I think she at times writes with readers in
mind, and though I think she exploits her power as narrator to not just delineate
truths but to discomfit those who’ve let themselves to be susceptible to her, I agree
with Buss that Mrs. Bentley is mostly concerned to use words to empower herself
against oppressors.

Early on in the text, Mrs. Finley is associated with crusaders. We note that just
after she finally contrives means to rebuff the town’s matrons, Mrs. Bentley makes
use of swordsman imagery to portray how she feels and behaves. Of course, she
often describes herself as “steeling” herself against her environment (her husband, in
particular, is frequently described as having steel or leaden eyes—ones, we note, that
can “clear a room” [116]), but it is really when she likens herself to a swordsman who
parries blows that she effectively co-opts this imagery to make herself equal to the
town’s matriarch, to all the town’s oppressive “weaponry.” After successfully using
scripture to legitimize her claim to Steve, she writes, “I parried them, cool and
patient” (81). Her successful rebuff leads to her feeling protected, to her now feeling
as if she possesses a “false front” (81)—a structure associated with Horizon’s smothering drabness but also with its resilience and persistence. She had need of it, for the matrons’ disapproval was leading to her feel compressed, with her own house, hardly her ally. Though she had tried to get it to “respond to her” (34), to help ward against a disproving outside environment, she wrote that “[t]here’s something lurking in the shadows, something that doesn’t approve of me, that won’t let me straighten my shoulders. Even the familiar old furniture is aloof. I didn’t know before it was so dull and ugly. It has taken sides against me with the house” (34). But exhilarated by the front she herself has created, she can now block out unwelcome attention. She writes, “And none of them knows. They spy and carp and preen themselves, but none of them knows. They can only read our shingle, all its letters freshened up this afternoon, As For me and My House—The House of Bentley—We Will Serve the Lord (81).”

The perpetrating “outside” also has difficulties with her husband’s office space. That is, though she actually finds a way to imagine her home as an ally, she consistently describes her husband’s study as being “always loyal to him” (85). It rebuffs all intruders, and it may in fact be described as a “stronghold” (85) so that Mrs. Bentley can better see it as an effective counter to the stone walls she knew she would repeatedly knock her head against in vain. Both he and his office space possess power akin to that held by the wilderness hills. In reference to the hills, she says, “We climb them, but they withstand us, remain as serene and unrevealed as ever. [. . .] We shrink from our insignificance” (131). And in reference to her husband and to his study, she says:

I like Philip’s study, but I’m seldom in it. Not even when he’s out, except to clean and dust. It’s reserved somehow, distant, just like him. It’s always loyal to him. It sees and knows him for what he really is, but it won’t let slip a word. This study and the others before it—they’re all the same. You don’t obtrude. You don’t take liberties. It’s like being a child in the presence of grown-ups who have troubles that can’t be explained to you. The books understand, but you don’t. (61)

It may be that Mr. Bentley’s association with the hills helps counter his association with the mountainous maternal church, an enclosure which, though it first promised escape, proved only to circumscribe his life.
He is made to seem a potential rival to the town’s leading matriarch, for, just after delineating Mrs. Finley’s ability to manage the town, Mrs. Bentley informs us that her husband “has a way of building in his own image, too” (9). But we note that after having had first establishing him as an upstart, Mrs. Bentley now tells us of how weary he has become. At times, she needs for him to be weary, needs to think of him as weary, out of deference to a superior need many readers might also share—security. She needs to know that if she leaves a dispiriting but familiar life that she is fully prepared for what may lie ahead. Those who flee the town too hastily, we note, are humbled, even decimated. Judith, we are told, when she suddenly left her family to seek work abroad, couldn’t manage her way in the world, and El Greco dies, after suddenly following upon his instinct to make for the wilderness. That is, when she writes that “with a man like Philip, you don’t predict the future from the past” (15), she expresses her fears as well as her hopes for the man. She needs to imagine him as strong and unpredictable as “an existential hero” (Moss 141) so that he seems suited to lead her away from a dispiriting life, but also fears his strength and erratic nature because it could leave her once again alone and fearful. But Mrs. Bentley proves not just an empowered writer but a clever and effective manager. She doesn’t adversarially manage her husband about like a trained terrier would a plough horse, but she still prevents him from expressing his hatred at a moment which would have lead to their pre-mature eviction from town. And if insecure readers want to feel at ease while reading the text, they would be pleased with her here, for they too would not want to risk (at some level) re-experiencing abandonment. So though Mrs. Bentley blames herself for doing so, she did the right thing: she needed time to better prepare herself so that departure from her familiar life seems more righteous and (therefore) less threatening—that is, as not just as something she needed or wanted for her own benefit.

Though near the end of the text Mrs. Bentley writes of how she is not “progressing” (196), this is actually opposite the case. We know that she makes this claim while she is accumulating sufficient funds to provision a new life for herself; and she may in fact be using her journal to progressively work toward believing she deserves to make use of her accumulating funds to accomplish what she really wants in life. Her journal, we note, is replete with delineations of just how impoverished she is. She lives a drab and disappointing life: we hear, for instance, of her drab house, her drab dress, and her (ostensibly) drab (same ol’ same ol’) everyday experiences. Just as often she makes dear how most others live nowhere near as drably as she does.
Every once in awhile she expresses her belief that she deserves more, but she says it with more conviction as her journal progresses, particularly after another key plot development—her husband’s affair with Judith. This is quite the betrayal, and does enormous harm, for she had earlier made dear that he alone could have made life in Horizon bearable. But it is also, however, liberating, for she writes that since “he’s been unfaithful to [her] [. . .], [she] ha[s] a right now to be free” (163): his betrayal empowers her better justifying her own needs. We note after she makes this assertion how assured her complaints of others’ indulgences become. Thinking of payments owed them by Kirby (a town they had once lived in), she says, “There wasn’t a woman in the congregation whose clothes were as dowdy and plain as mine. They never missed their little teas and bridge parties” (165). She seems irritated, but also determined. She admits she “want[s] to get away now more than ever” (166), and may now be ready for the move, for if she and Philip moved on to a better life their accomplishments there wouldn’t feel so undeserved.

This—suspecting at heart you’re unworthy of happiness—is what would draw a masochist to undermine any success she achieved, to as speedily as possible deplete any store of sums she had patiently acquired, and by so frequently making use of her journal to delineate all the various wounds Horizon and her husband have inflicted upon her, she gives every appearance of being one. But even if she isn’t (but really, she is), many of her readers might be, for masochism is a psychic defense adopted to help fend off concerns of maternal retribution. As Rheingold explains, “It takes its origin in the child’s compliance with or appeasement of the destructive attitudes and impulses of the mother” (21), and helps the child pretend that she isn’t really attending to her own needs, really isn’t behaving in any way worthy of maternal punishment. The text, though, may help masochists in feeling that they too can narrate their life so that self-growth becomes more acceptable. Maybe, they might be more likely to conclude, others out there are indulging themselves much more than they themselves have been—perhaps they are the ones who truly deserve punishment, not so much the comparatively modest ourselves. Maybe, they might conclude, the severity of their own past suffering and stress—the insecurity owing to world conditions after 9-11 but a source—has been such that they are now finally entitled to a reprieve, that they are now actually owed some happiness. Some psychohistorians argue that ancient civilizations used to practice child sacrifice to feel they might now be allowed to keep, not only their crops but their remaining children (DeMause 137). Perhaps the lose-one-keep one “logic” behind infant sacrifice holds true for those
dearly nowhere disturbed enough to be infanticidal—perhaps, that is, the loss of Steve and El Greco might help Mrs. Bentley feel more entitled to keep her husband’s and Judith’s child. Just as she deemed Kirby’s indulgent behavior fair reason to firm up her claim to the money owed them, Judith’s indulgence might make her feel more entitled to take her (i.e., Judith’s) baby away from her.

At one point in her journal she suggests that Horizon is unnatural for it being out of sync with the earth’s underlying rhythms. For such disregard and disrespect, it (i.e., Horizon) is obstinate and “insolent” (23)—bad. We note that she might then have been making way for her own departure from town to be in accord with nature—and therefore ultimately appropriate and “right”—for her departure is in accord with a rhythm—that of expulsion, following inflation—which determines how and when relevant objects appear and disappear from Horizon. Just before “they t[ook] Steve away” (152), she tells us that the heat of the town “had been gathering and tightening [. . .] for weeks” (150). She writes that “[i]t’s like watching an inflated, ever distending balloon, waiting with bated breath for it to burst” (150). Just before they “lost El Greco” (196) we are told that, after looking “at the houses and thinking of all the suspense and excitement inside,” after thinking of how in contrast her own “little house [. . .] seemed [. . .] dead and dry [,]” she felt “like an abscess [was] gathering [inside her] [. . .] [which promised] release” (195). Especially given the text’s substantial attendance to the Bentleys’ need for a child, the plotting would be understood by the reader as of birth following late-term pregnancy. Her exodus from town seems natural and appropriate because it follows, accompanies, her husband’s baby’s emergence from Judith’s birth canal. Her exodus is primed and timed to seem as if it well could be overlooked, because Horizon’s appetite for hubris is satiated by the adulteress Judith’s demise (which, we note, is [essentially] concurrent with the baby’s birth).

Would an insecure reader benefit from Bentleys’ birth into a new world? Indeed they would: they would find their own emergence from the textual world less jarring. More substantively, they would at some level sense that when the world about them feels most oppressive, most depressing and dispiriting, there might, somewhere in the near horizon, in fact be a promising new world about to receive and relieve them. In the meantime, the text served as a secure place to equip themselves with the narrative and reasoning resources to help manage the world in its current and still very threatening state.
Works Cited