

Mothers in Literature 9 November 2013

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The American novelist Paul Auster claims that '*The only place you exist is in your head*'. If he's right then when you, in your work as therapists, encounter unsettled, anxious, troubled, questioning individuals, you reach towards untangling and teasing out those uneasy minds.

So, I would like to begin this morning with a question and three sentences from a 198-year old novel: What kind of a mind do you have? And the novel? It's my favourite moment from my favourite novel, Jane Austen's *Emma*, first published in December 1815.

Jane Austen's *Emma* could have been called *Four Weddings and a Funeral* for it contains those very things but in addition to romance and marriage and the spirited foolishness and contrition of the heroine and the one death that occurs offstage there is a deceptively ordinary moment.

In *Emma*, Chapter 27, two young women, aged 21 and 17, are, surprise, surprise, doing what many young women like: they are shopping. The younger woman Harriet Smith can not make up her mind which ribbons and dress material to buy and her older friend Emma Woodhouse is becoming more and more impatient. So, Emma, to avoid getting more and more annoyed, goes to the door of the shop for distraction.

And here's what happens. First, Austen tells us what Emma hopes to see in the street. Then she tells us what she does see and it doesn't quite match her expectations. And finally, and this is the genius of Austen, she offers us an insight into the way our minds can work. And she gives us that glorious line '*a mind lively and at ease*' which describes and captures a state we would all be the better for were we to achieve it.

It is a way of viewing the world in a positive, enriching, creative way. That's what, I feel, would make our lives happier and wholesome, if we all had minds that were 'lively and at ease'. And the good news is that such an outlook can be of our own making.

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And now to mothers! First, an image by the Irish artist Alice Maher. This is an image of a girl lost within clothes too big for her. It's an image of a girl heading towards womanhood, motherhood, perhaps, and the challenges involved. The girl peeps over the collar of the dress. If Wordsworth is right when he tells us that '*The child is father of the man*' then the child is also the mother of the woman.

There is another Alice Maher work that is even more relevant to our topic here today but it was too difficult to reproduce. When Maher's mother was dying of cancer she went home to Bansha in Tipperary to be with her. And by way of coping with her pain and heartbreak Alice Maher gathered briars from the hedges and the fields and shaped

them into a huge globe of thorns. This was how she articulated her response to her dying mother. It's both simple and complex and it's very powerful.

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When I was invited to talk to you on the topic of Mothers in Literature, Mothers in Poetry, I was struck by the enormity of the task. How many years do we have? But the following day I came across this sentence in a novel I was reading at the time: Nadine Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World*:

Gordimer says: *We belong to the generation that lays down its burden on Freud, as our parents were exhorted to lay down theirs on Jesus*

And I thought, well there's a starting point of sorts. Mary, the mother of Jesus and Freud's theories of mothers and motherhood and famously Freud's revisiting the Oedipus myth for a powerful interpretation of motherhood. Of course, putting Jesus and Freud in the same sentence is to acknowledge a two-thousand year temporal perspective and every variation on mothers in between times.

The mother is obviously central to our existence. There is no continuity without her. And in life and in art, especially fiction, drama, poetry, painting she continues to play a vital, central role. I don't have facts and figures but when I was in school I read that over 42% of all paintings in London's National Gallery depicted mother and child and it makes sense. Difficult to think of an artist who hasn't painted an image of a mother and child and that mother and that child are usually Mary and Jesus.

This morning, all I can hope to do is to explore the multi-faceted, complex and contrasting topic of mother in literature but mainly in poetry. Every writer in the world was of woman born and even though some children are separated or estranged from their mothers at birth, or if a mother dies in childbirth an image of a mother remains with them all their lives, an image that can be suffused with sorrow, longing, questions.

I've called my talk here this morning '*Her voided lap. Her clapping hand*' because in these words from Seamus Heaney's poem 'Mother of the Groom' he captures the inevitable sorrow that accompanies the mother/child relationship but he places that sorrow side-by-side with the happiness, a happiness tinged with sadness, that the mother feels as she wishes her son well on his way. A woman gives birth to a child; a woman becomes a mother; a mother in the ultimate test of her love must let her child go. In the Heaney poem her son is now a groom, his wife in turn may well become a mother and so the life cycle continues.

That line from the New Testament - '*But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart*' from Luke 2:19 is a beautiful, resonant phrase. It's acknowledging the depth and mystery and in Mary's case the isolation of motherhood.

And one of the earliest known references in English poetry is the 9thC Anglo-Saxon poem 'Advent' in which Mary is told that '*Deliverance is entirely dependent upon you alone*'. It is through her becoming the mother of God, a tall order, that the world will be saved. Yeats's poem 'The Mother of God' written in September 1931 focuses

on something similar. He imagines the strangest kind of motherhood ever: the terror of Mary taking on board the strangeness of a virgin birth and he speaks there of ‘the three-fold terror of love’:

*The three-fold terror of love, a fallen flare
Through the hollow of an ear;
Wings beating about the room;
The terror of all terrors that I bore
The Heavens in my womb*

There’s a Medieval English four-line poem which captures that sorrow that attends Mary as she stands at the foot of the cross but the poems in this handout illustrate but some of the vast range of material in recent writing.

That dying soldiers on the battlefield call for their mothers, not their wives or girlfriends, is testament to the strength of the umbilical cord. The different names we use - Mam, Mum, Mom, Ma, Mother - have different connotations. In German there are four terms for mother, in descending order of familiarity: Mami; Mama; Mutti and Mutter.

Angela Merkel is dubbed ‘Mutti’ or mummy and she is called this by friend and foe. Does Enda Kenny see her as a Mammy?. Mary McAleese was certainly more Mammy than Mary Robinson.

And to add to the confusion, Oxford set an exam question some years back which read ‘God is our Mother and she is Black’. The mother concept is complex.

That many writers – writers as different as Shakespeare, Enid Byton, J K Rowling, Jane Austen, Henry James – frequently remove or kill off the mother figure thus allowing the protagonist journey towards self-discovery. [As an aside Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth is the most chilling and frightening image of motherhood when she says:

*I have given suck, and know
How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.]*

But that’s fiction. In real life William Wordsworth, John Keats, the Brontes, George Eliot all lost their mothers when they were young and of course I know it’s too simplistic to draw general conclusions but it is of huge significance that Wordsworth whose mother died when he was eight [his father died when he was thirteen] in his poem Tintern Abbey he says that Nature is a Mother Nature: she is ‘*the nurse,/ The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ of all my moral being*’.

Emily Dickinson would agree. Though Dickinson’s mother died only a few years before her daughter, in Dickinson’s 1,775 poems there is only one reference to mother

and it's not Mrs Dickinson. Emily Dickinson, her daughter, says in poem dated 1863, when Dickinson was thirty-three:

Nature the gentlest mother is

But Mother Nature is many-faceted – she may be the gentlest mother but Mother Nature also kicks ass. Just think tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes, tornadoes.

Myth, life and literature, the Oedipal myth, the New Testament, Shakespeare's Hamlet have given us in Jocasta, Mary and Gertrude some of the most enduring examples of mothers.

Mother. Along with home is one of the more potent words. And motherhood happens in different ways. A woman conceives and gives birth but incest, rape, IVF treatment clouds and complicates the image.

The mother of apple pie and gingham table cloth is just that. A sweet and pretty image. The other mothers are the more interesting ones and there are as many mothers as there are adjectives to describe them.

Or could William Somerset Maugham be right when he wrote, in his notebook, aged twenty-two '*a really affectionate mother is dangerous*'. Mother love becomes smother love.

We'll turn to the poems, but just before we do, three other texts that I've encountered recently all present us with different aspects of motherhood.

In Margaret Drabble's latest novel *The Pure Gold Baby*, the focus is on the mother/child relationship. And the child, Anna, is what we call Special Needs. Here Drabble identifies that unique relationship:

Anna loved her mother with an exemplary filial devotion, seeming to be aware from the earliest age of her own unusual dependence. As our children and the other children we knew came to defy us and to tug at our apron strings and to yearn for separation, Anna remained intimate with her mother, shadowing her closely, responding to every movement of her body and mind, approving her every act.

Frank McGuinness's recent play, *The Hanging Gardens*, at the Abbey portrays motherhood in the character of Jane Grant as an obsessive, eccentric woman who prefers her flowers and plants to her children. Late in the play her daughter turns her and says: *You planted a bloody garden. You mended a run-down house. Everything else – an inconvenience. . . . When push comes to shove, you are a thoroughly nasty woman.* And there even the word mother has been replaced by the word woman. For this daughter it is as if the title hasn't been earned or deserved.

Colm Toibin's novella *The Testament of Mary* gives history's most famous mother a voice that rejects and subverts received or given versions of Mary's account of the death of Jesus. In Colm Toibin's version she is headstrong, suspicious and she deeply loves her son. And she strongly disapproves of the misfits and wasters that followed Jesus. And she was at the crucifixion but she didn't witness his death.

Toibin is rewriting what has been gospel for two thousand years. Toibin's Mary is a fiercely intelligent woman. She knows and understands better than anyone her dead son and what is happening to him now. She resents the two unnamed men who visit her and write things down. But they won't write it down as she says it happened. She believes they are constructing a myth. It's a convincing, credible portrait. And moving without being mawkish. The evangelists want to write their version. Mary isn't interested. She tells them:

*I want to live again before my son's death happened, or before he left home, when he was a baby and his father was alive and there was ease in the world. . .
I was there. I fled before it was over but if you want witnesses then I am one and I can tell you now, when you say that he redeemed the world, I will say that it was not worth it. It was not worth it.*

But NOW to some poems. Any why read poetry? A few weeks ago I heard Professor Sir Stephen Patrick O'Rahilly being interviewed on the radio. His speciality is endocrine obesity and the genetic causes of diabetes and he says the textbooks tell him how to diagnose the patient but he reads literature because the novel, the poem help him understand how a patient is thinking, feeling, imagining. And so too our being here this morning:

The poems in this little booklet look at mothers from different perspectives. From a daughter's point of view, a son's point of view, a mother's point of view and allow us experience a range of emotions. Eavan Boland claims that poetry is a very poor way of expressing emotion but poetry is an excellent way of experiencing emotion.

Not many people today will read a newspaper dated 13 July 1798 but Wordsworth on that day, composed in his head and then wrote it down his great symphonic poem 'Tintern Abbey' and that will continue to be read because as Wordsworth himself says '*Poetry is the history of science and feeling*'.

To end, and even though I know little about the work you do, I came across in Stephen Grosz's book *The Examined Life* something which struck me as really important. Grosz says that

Psychoanalysts are fond of pointing out that the past is alive in the present. But the future is alive in the present too. The future is not some place we're going to, but an idea in our mind now. It is something we're creating, that in turn creates us.

That's a positive note as is Emily Dickinson's idea that '*The world is not conclusion*'. I'll end on that realistic and comforting note. Life is process.

And may I also quote that poster that hung on my classroom wall that reads:

'If you're not confused, you haven't been listening.'