

**FOR  
REFERENCE ONLY**

**The Will to Truth: An Exploration of Modern Motherhood  
In Contemporary Literature**

**by**

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## **Statement of Objectives**

The objectives of this thesis are:

- to explore and trace the growing trend in depicting painful and disturbing experiences of maternal ambivalence in a significant body of literature of the twentieth century which culminates in an explosion of such writing in contemporary fiction and memoir between 1995-2010;
- to enrich and expand the current understanding of the representation of such maternal ambivalence by identifying a move towards depicting ambivalence in fiction and memoir as a normal reaction to the transition to motherhood, as opposed to a dysfunctional aspect of it;
- to demonstrate a correlation between certain postmodern and feminist ideas that arose towards the end of the twentieth century with a recent tendency within turn of this century fiction and memoir to depict the difficulties of mothering in a world without meaning and their effects on mother-child relationships;
- to provide explanations for a lack of representations of physical pleasure between mother and child in this fiction;
- to explore a development in recent literary depictions of the maternal body, child-birth and rearing away from a feminist understanding of patriarchal persecution towards a more Foucaultian awareness of government's desire to control the 'administration of life';
- to identify medicalised childbirth as interfering with a good birth experience, affecting bonding, love and the generation of a moral bond between mother and child;
- to highlight the difficulties of writing about the mother from an ethical perspective following a period in history identified by moral philosophers as suffering from a dearth of moral language and concepts;
- to argue that recent fiction and memoir depicts a moral impoverishment of the mothering experience 1995-2010.

## Abbreviations

For secondary texts surnames and page numbers are used for parenthetical references.

Acronyms and page numbers are used for novels and memoirs.

### List of acronyms for primary texts

#### Fiction/Memoir

*ALW: A Life's Work*

*BV: The Bradshaw Variations*

*FC: The Fifth Child*

*GA: Gas and Air*

*GST: The God of Small Things*

*HSD: I Don't Know How She Does It*

*HY: Hey Yeah Right Get A Life*

*I: Incendiary*

*K: We Need to Talk about Kevin*

*LH: The Little House*

*M: The Millstone*

*P: Puffball*

*R: The Rainbow*

*SL: Sons and Lovers*

*SM: Sons and Mothers*

*SMH: Something Might Happen*



## Abstract

This thesis was inspired by a perceptible increase and change in depictions of motherhood in fiction and memoir between the years 1995-2010. It traces a body of intense motherhood literature that grew steadily throughout the twentieth century and culminated in an explosion of such writing at the turn of this century. The study contends that a significant body of these texts were directly reacting to inequalities still inherent in the social and cultural demands made on mothers. It also suggests a correlation between these inequalities and the increase of deeply ambivalent feelings about motherhood evident in this turn of the century literature. The first chapter considers the intensification of maternal ambivalence in this fiction and memoir and investigates the growing desire to establish this ambivalence as a normal reaction to the transition to motherhood. It also explores the resistance to historical narratives that imply the necessity for maternal sacrifice. By looking at seminal texts from the twentieth century, it considers where and how the myth of the ideal mother was constructed, demonstrating how such ideals came to influence contemporary writers. Hence, chapter two engages with the work of Michel Foucault and illustrates how certain postmodern ideas have coalesced with post or third-wave feminism to affect depictions of the mother in literature. This chapter argues that the lack of certainty in the mothering experience arises from notions of good mothering that have been patriarchally constructed and are, therefore, politically manipulative and suspect. As a consequence, writers have been inspired to re-imagine motherhood in a world without meaning. Chapter three considers the depiction of motherhood's pleasures that sit *outside* the construction of the ideal mother. It focuses on literary portraits of transgressive mothers, in particular those displaying problematic mother-child physical intimacy and mothers who are sexually active outside their relationship with their children's father. This chapter identifies both significant changes in the representation of mother-child intimacy and a surprising stasis in the fictional treatment of adulterous mothers. Finally, the thesis concludes with the ethical nature of motherhood and the duty of care parents owe to their children. This concluding chapter considers how certain twentieth-century discourses, including those influential in certain aspects of literary criticism, have contributed to an impoverishment of the motherhood experience which is strikingly evident in this particular body of fiction and memoir of motherhood written between 1995-2010.



Bellini (1430-1516): *Madonna and Child* (c. late 1480s).  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

**““Christ, what have I done?”**

**Mary asked the son of God.’<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Allison Pearson, *I Don't Know How She Does It* (London: Vintage, 2003), p.279.

**Introduction -**  
**The Myth of Equality in Motherhood**  
**and the Growth of Maternal Ambivalence**  
**in Literature**

This thesis was inspired by a notable increase and change in depictions of motherhood in both fiction and memoir between 1995-2010.<sup>1</sup> The sudden eruption of motherhood literature in these years was so conspicuous that it attracted the epithets of “mummy lit” or, because of the autobiographical element of the genre, “momoir”.<sup>2</sup> Writing in 2005, Stephanie Wilkinson and Jennifer Niesslein, editors of *Brain, Child*, recall how outraged they were in 2000 to discover ‘there were probably as many literary books on bull-fighting as there were on the near universal experience of raising kids’.<sup>3</sup> However, five years on, they note a dramatic reversal of fortune for the mother in literature, triumphantly reporting that now ‘anyone can go into a decent

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to include both memoir and fiction because I am interested in exploring the ideological issues exposed by the tension between the experiences of the individual, particularised mother and the generalised, accepted view of what a mother should be. Margaret Drabble makes an interesting distinction between the memoir and the novel in an interview about her novel, *The Peppered Moth* (2000). She chose the novel form over the memoir to write about her own mother as she felt that the novel gave her the opportunity to ‘generalise. You can say that this is the kind of thing mothers do to their daughters. And I could look at her as part of her generation’. Margaret Drabble interview with Suzie MacKenzie, ‘Mothers and Daughters’, *Guardian*, 16 December 2000, Weekend Section, p.38; Margaret Drabble, *The Peppered Moth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Some examples of motherhood memoir includes Andrea J. Buchanan, *Mother Shock: Loving Every (Other) Minute of It* (New York: Seal Press, 2003); Anne Enright, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004); Faulkner Fox, *Dispatches from a Not-So-Perfect Life or How I Learned to Love the House, the Man, the Child* (New York: Harmony Books, 2003); Susan Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk About It* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); Carole Maso, *The Room Lit by Roses: A Journal of Pregnancy and Birth* (New York: Counterpoint Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Wilkinson and Jennifer Niesslein, ‘Tales from the (Mother) Hood: Motherhood in Book Publishing’, *Brain, Child*, (Spring 2005)  
 <<http://www.brainchildmag.com/essays/spring2005-neisslein-wilkinson.html>> [accessed 12 July 2006] (p.1), hereafter Wilkinson and Niesslein.

bookstore and find volumes of thought-provoking writing about motherhood' (Wilkinson and Niesslein, p.1). Andrea O'Reilly also notes that 'all agree that "mommy lit" is a very recent literary genre, emerging only within the last decade'.<sup>4</sup>

The growth in popular literature about motherhood has also been reflected in a renewed interest in the mother in the field of academic scholarship. Significantly, in 1998 O'Reilly created The Association for Research on Mothering (ARM) at York University, Toronto. ARM holds annual conferences on the topic of mothering, has its own journal dedicated to the subject (established in 1999), and set up its own press, Demeter, in 2006. O'Reilly's intention in establishing ARM has been to 'promote, showcase, and make visible maternal scholarship, to accord legitimacy to this academic field, and to provide a community for like-minded scholars who research and work in the area of motherhood'.<sup>5</sup> ARM is also responsible for the first ever *Encyclopaedia of Motherhood*, published in 2010.<sup>6</sup> The surge in publication of literature concerning the mother invited this investigation, as did the change in the nature of the mother's depiction. This thesis, therefore, tracks and explores features common across recent representations of motherhood, drawing connections between the real mother and how she is represented in this burgeoning body of fiction and memoir.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, 'The Motherhood Memoir and the "New Momism": Biting the Hand That Feeds You', in *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, ed. by Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2010), pp.203-13 (p.203), hereafter Podnieks and O'Reilly.

<sup>5</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, "Stories to Live By": Maternal Literatures and Motherhood Studies', in Podnieks and O'Reilly, pp.367-72 (p.368). See also Demeter Press <[www.yorku.ca/arm.](http://www.yorku.ca/arm.)>

<sup>6</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, *Encyclopaedia of Motherhood* (California: Sage Publications, 2010).

Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly's research argues that the new "mommy lit" marks a development from 'the daughter-centric stories (those that privilege the daughter's voice)<sup>7</sup> that have, to be sure, dominated maternal traditions, to the matrilineal and matrifocal perspectives that have emerged over the last few decades as the mother's voice - in all its rhythms and ranges - has moved slowly [...] from silence to speech'.<sup>8</sup> It is the mother's story written from a matrifocal viewpoint, that 'begin[s] with the mother in her own right, from her own perspective', and, 'hold[s] fast to the maternal perspective' (Podnieks and O'Reilly, p.3)<sup>9</sup> that is the focus of this research. Accordingly, all the texts discussed in this thesis feature prominent, realistic depictions of motherhood.

The chosen fiction and memoir were also selected on the basis that they exhibit another feature prominent in recent maternal writing (as noted by Emily Jeremiah): they involve 'a publicising of maternal experience, and [a]

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<sup>7</sup> The 'Mother/Daughter Relationship' forms a sizeable entry in the dictionary section of *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (2001). The entry supports Podnieks and O'Reilly's findings, stating that 'the relationship between mother and daughter is a much-analysed subject in both feminist art and theory. There has been a substantial amount of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical material published by feminist writers in recent years which is specifically focused around the figure of the mother, such as Carolyn Steedman's *A Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1986), Marilyn French's *Her Mother's Daughter* (New York: Summit Books, 1987) and Margaret Forster's, *Hidden Lives: a Family Memoir* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), [the latter is included in this thesis]. In all these narratives, the mother appears as a problematic figure, towards whom the author experiences contradictory feelings of closeness and distance. In its reconstruction of the mother's history, the text itself is an attempt to bridge the gap between mother and daughter, yet in its "authoring" of the story also implicitly repudiates the anonymous life the mother represents'. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p.278, hereafter Gamble. Novelist Anne Enright comments on the changing focus from child's to mother's perspective in her memoir *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2004): 'what I am interested in is not the drama of being a child, but this new drama of being a mother [...] about which so little has been written. Can mothers not hold a pen?' (p.42).

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly, 'Introduction: Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives', in Podnieks and O'Reilly, pp.1-24 (p.2).

<sup>9</sup> In their introduction, Podnieks and O'Reilly summarise the work of Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

subver[sion] [of] the traditional notion of the mother as an instinctual, purely corporeal being'.<sup>10</sup> The books considered here are intent on exposing the realities of motherhood to their readers; moreover, these texts have been selected on the basis of having been particularly successful in their efforts to tell the mother's story. Hence, the majority of the fiction and memoir included in this thesis, although culturally diverse, is mainstream. It is either popular, prize-winning, seminal or notorious in some way. Despite the novel's initial difficulty in finding a publisher, Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003), for example, has achieved both critical and commercial success, winning the Orange Prize for fiction in 2005.<sup>11</sup> It has also been serialised on Radio 4 and was released as a film in October 2011, having premiered at the Cannes film festival in May 2011 and winning the Palme d'Or.<sup>12</sup> Other prize winning literature included here includes Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997),<sup>13</sup> winner of the Booker Prize in 1997; and Helen Simpson's *Hey Yeah Right Get A Life* (2000), winner of the Hawthorden Prize in 2001.<sup>14</sup>

The rationale behind this selection was to consider literature that has had the ability to inform and influence perceptions of motherhood: books that have contributed to the awareness of the new "mummy lit" and to the concept

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<sup>10</sup> Emily Jeremiah, 'Troublesome Practices: Mothering, Literature and Ethics', in *Mother Matters: Motherhood as Discourse and Practice*, ed. by Andrea O'Reilly (Toronto: ARM Press, 2004), pp.231-41 (p.231), hereafter Jeremiah, 'Practices'.

<sup>11</sup> Lionel Shriver, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003); (New York: Counterpoint; London: Serpent's Tail, 2005), hereafter *K*.

<sup>12</sup> *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. Dir. Lynne Ramsay. Oscilloscope Pictures. October 2011. The actress Tilda Swinton plays Eva.

<sup>13</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1997), hereafter *GST*.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Simpson, *Hey Yeah Right Get A Life* (2000); (London: Vintage, 2001), hereafter *HY*. Stories from *Hey Yeah* have been performed on BBC Radio 3 and 4. They have also been published in *Granta*, *New Yorker*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and the *Mail on Sunday's* *You* magazine. Simpson has been described by *The Times* magazine as the 'poet Laureatess of motherhood'. Candida Crewe, 'Beyond the Pram in the Hall', *The Times*, 24 March 2001, Saturday magazine, pp.20-24 (p.24).

of maternal ambivalence. So, whilst acknowledging that my selected texts vary in quality, they are, I believe, equally significant to the discussion of representations of the ambivalent mother in contemporary culture. Allison Pearson's novel *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002) began its life as a series of popular 'Kate Reddy' columns in the *Daily Telegraph*, and as a novel has sold over four million copies.<sup>15</sup> *I Don't Know How She Does It* was also released as a film starring Sarah Jessica Parker as Kate, in September 2011.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Chris Cleave's novel *Incendiary* (2005)<sup>17</sup> is included on the basis of both its notoriety and popularity, having also been released as a film in 2008, starring Ewan McGregor.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Philippa Gregory's psychological thriller *The Little House* (1998)<sup>19</sup> was serialised for ITV television in January 2011, attracting nearly six million viewers.<sup>20</sup> These depictions of the mother are all sufficiently well-known to have contributed to a public/cultural consciousness of motherhood.

Consequently, this thesis also includes a selection of different types of writing: novels, short stories and memoir. Novels and memoirs offer the reader different perspectives of motherhood: whereas the memoir offers one subjective point of view, the novel can test, play and debate ideas using

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<sup>15</sup> Allison Pearson, *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002); (London: Vintage, 2003), hereafter *HSD*.

<sup>16</sup> *I Don't Know How She Does It*. Dir. Douglas McGrath. Entertainment Film. September 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Cleave, *Incendiary* (2005); (London: Sceptre, 2009), hereafter *I*.

<sup>18</sup> *Incendiary*. Dir. Sharon Maguire. Miramax Films (USA), Pathé (UK). 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Philippa Gregory, *The Little House* (1998); (London: Harper, 2010), hereafter *LH*.

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting that mother representations are often distorted in the transfer from page to screen in order to cater to a more conservative audience. In the ITV1 production of 'The Little House', for example, Ruth is depicted as accidentally killing Elizabeth in a tussle on the stairs, rather than ruthlessly plotting and executing her murder. This change of ending suggests the concern that the viewer's sympathy for Ruth could not withstand her becoming a mother who murders. 'The Little House', adapted for ITV1 by Ed Whitmore. Dir. Jamie Payne. TXTV Productions. 2011.

multiple characters. The maternal memoir has become an observable feature of motherhood literature between 1995-2010 and provides a unique insight into the position of the personal in writing about motherhood. Recent memoirs have been produced by mothers who write, or by 'mothers who define themselves centrally as writers – usually novelists - and who draw upon their attunement to language and narrative form in order to portray their own distinctive experience of being mothers'.<sup>21</sup>

The memoir most significant to my discussion is *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001) by the novelist Rachel Cusk.<sup>22</sup> Cusk offers her readers a 'personal record of transition' following the birth of her first child, recalling a period of her life that she found so difficult she had almost 'wilfully forgot [because] I couldn't bear, in fact, to feel it' (*ALW*, p.2). Her autobiographical account of the ambivalent feelings motherhood engendered saw her 'embroiled in controversy with which her name remains connected and which she says has stuck to her like a label'.<sup>23</sup> The strength and negative nature of some reactions to Cusk's memoir (discussed in detail in chapter two) reveal an intensification of the ethical concerns and responsibilities that come with what G. Thomas Couser refers to as 'intimate life writing - that done within families and couples'.<sup>24</sup> Couser concludes that 'the closer the relationship between writer and subject [...] the higher the ethical stakes' (Couser, p.xii).

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<sup>21</sup> Joanne S. Frye, 'Narrating Maternal Subjectivity: Memoirs from Motherhood', in Podnieks and O'Reilly, pp.187-201 (p.191).

<sup>22</sup> Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001); (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), hereafter *ALW*. Cusk was named as one of Granta's 20 best young British novelists in 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Taken from the introduction to *Variations on the Work of Rachel Cusk*, a conference held by the University of Rennes, February 2011.

<sup>24</sup> G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), p.xii.



Cusk was not unaware of the restrictions life writing can impose; she discusses the subject as part of the introduction to *A Life's Work*:

As a novelist, I admit that I find this candid type of writing slightly alarming. Aside from the prospect of self-revelation, it demands on the part of the author a willingness to trespass on the lives of those around him or her. In this case, I have trespassed by omission. So I have not said much about my particular circumstances, nor about the people with whom I live, nor about the other relationships inevitably surrounding the relationship I describe with my child. (*ALW*, p.5)

Cusk remains true to her intention and the memoir does indeed observe her family's right to privacy. Nonetheless, because Cusk was a "real life" mother writing about her own experiences of mothering, she could not protect herself or her family life from public scrutiny following the memoir's publication. As Paul John Eakin argues, 'life writers are criticised not only for not telling the truth [...] but also for telling too much truth [...] the public airing of a private hurt [...] [is] not universally welcomed'.<sup>25</sup>

The reaction to Cusk's memoir also tells us something of the cultural taboos surrounding motherhood at the time of its publication. Alluding to the furore generated by her memoir in 'Shakespeare's daughters' (2009), she writes:

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<sup>25</sup> Paul John Eakin, 'Introduction: Mapping the Ethics of Life Writing', in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. by Paul John Eakin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp.1-19 (p.3).

having taken the trouble to write honestly [the female writer] can find herself being read dishonestly. And in my own experience as a writer, it is the places where honesty is most required – because it is here that compromise and false consciousness and ‘mystification’ continue to endanger the integrity of a woman’s life – that it is most vehemently rejected. I am talking, of course, about [...] domesticity and motherhood and family life.<sup>26</sup>

At the time of writing, Cusk’s memoir broke new ground and blazed a trail for the recent trend in maternal self-expression. The fact that *Guardian* columnist Jennie Bristow can criticise Shriver’s novel *Kevin* in 2005 on the basis that ‘there is nothing taboo about whinging in print about the everyday grind of maternity [...] [because] over recent years, a number of “taboo-breaking” non-fiction books have exposed the dark side of motherhood’, reflects how influential these initial mother memoirs have been.<sup>27</sup> Kate Douglas makes the point that ‘the auto/biographies that are published are authorised by the cultures within which they emerge’.<sup>28</sup> The fact that Cusk was vilified for writing about her experiences as a mother, whereas later memoirs have been largely accepted, reveals a significant change in contemporary representations of motherhood in which Cusk’s memoir has

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<sup>26</sup> Rachel Cusk, ‘Shakespeare’s daughters’, *Guardian*, 12 December 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/dec/12/rachel-cusk-women-writing-review>> [accessed 18 May 2011] (p.6), hereafter ‘Shakespeare’s daughters’.

<sup>27</sup> Jennie Bristow, ‘We Don’t Need to Talk about Hating Our Kids’, *Guardian*, 14 June 2005, <<http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/829>> [accessed 18 May 2011] (p.2)

<sup>28</sup> Kate Douglas, ‘Writing About Abusive Mothers: Ethics and Auto/biography’, in Podnieks and O’Reilly, pp.63-74 (p.74). Douglas cites both Couser and Eakin as part of her discussion, p.64.

been instrumental.<sup>29</sup> Together, memoir and fiction from this period have established maternal ambivalence as part of the mothering experience, to the extent where *A Life's Work* is now included on the reading list of The National Childbirth Trust.<sup>30</sup>

Hence, a shared motivation behind the proliferation of memoir and motherhood fiction from 1995-2010 is a discernible authorial moral intention to expose what these writers perceive to be the "truth" about motherhood.<sup>31</sup> In her analysis of *A Life's Work*, Joanne S. Frye concludes that Cusk's objective was

to write as rawly and negatively as she can about the shock of new motherhood and the culture's failure to prepare her for it - even as she explores new ways to love, learned by being a mother. She examines her own experiences through the dual lens of chafing honesty and a cultural norm that belies her individual experience. (Frye, p.196)

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<sup>29</sup> The desire to be honest about the transition to motherhood demonstrated by the pioneers of the mother memoir has, to a degree, been misrepresented by some writers that have followed. Recent memoirs demonstrate a trend toward disingenuously portraying oneself as a "bad" mother: for either comic affect or shock value. This "bad mother" sub-genre plays on Frye's observation that 'the tension between self and selflessness automatically labels a mother as "bad" when she asserts her own rights to maternal complexity' (Frye, p.189). Recent examples include Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), Stephanie Calman, *Confessions of a Bad Mother* (London: MacMillan Press, 2005) and Ayelet Waldman, *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace* (New York: Doubleday, 2009) in which she admits she loves her husband, author Michael Chabon, more than her children.

<sup>30</sup> The National Childbirth Trust (NCT) is a UK-based charity offering information and support in pregnancy, childbirth and early childhood. The Trust's activities include parentcraft classes, breastfeeding advice and organising nearly-new sales.

<sup>31</sup> In addition to the fiction and memoir of this period, self-help books also advertise themselves on the basis of their honesty with regards to pregnancy, childbirth and rearing. Kaz Cooke introduces her book, *The Rough Guide to Pregnancy* with 'are you ready to make the transition from-ready-for-anything-at-a-moments-notice to "slave-to-baby" mummy-who-hasn't-had-time-to-shower-in-two-days'. Kaz Cooke, *The Rough Guide to Pregnancy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Rough Guides, 2006), p.10. See also Rebecca Odes and Ceridwen Morris, *From the Hips: A Comprehensive, Open-minded, Uncensored, Totally Honest Guide to Pregnancy, Birth and Becoming a Parent* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007).

Heather Hewett similarly observes that 'the only requirement seemed to be that [the new motherhood literature] explored the "real" experience of motherhood honestly, without sentimentality or idealisation or judgement'.<sup>32</sup> Hewett's contention is shared by psychologist Rozsika Parker, who has also noted a change in the nature of motherhood literature. In the foreword to the second edition of her book *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (2005), she expresses her surprise that

since 1995 when *Torn in Two* was first published [...] the literature on motherhood has also transformed. An astonishing number of books have been published, written by mothers in the wake of motherhood. All are to a large extent autobiographical; some are courageously confessional, documenting the pleasures and pains of maternity unflinchingly. Others are more like manuals of motherhood in which authors share their hard-won knowledge. Still others provide cultural critiques of the conditions of motherhood. All carry the underlying message 'it was not what I expected'. In the new motherhood literature, mothers address other mothers, speaking bitterness, telling it like it is.<sup>33</sup>

This thesis traces an intensifying and expanding body of fiction and memoir which explores this maternal ambivalence that grew steadily

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<sup>32</sup> Heather Hewett, 'You Are Not Alone: The Personal, the Political, and the "New" Mommy Lit', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.119-40 (p.121), cited in Podnieks and O'Reilly, p.203.

<sup>33</sup> Rozsika Parker, *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (1995); 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Virago Press, 2005), p.xiii.

throughout the twentieth century<sup>34</sup> and culminated in an explosion of such writing at the turn of this century. Deborah Levy's review of Cusk's memoir in the *Independent* situates *A Life's Work* within this depiction of ambivalence: 'mothers are usually compelled to say, "I love my children ... but". It is the "but" that Cusk bravely stresses'.<sup>35</sup> Gregory's novel *The Little House* and Shriver's novel *Kevin* are significant fictions in the discussion of ambivalent mothers in literature. Such depictions of maternal ambivalence can, at times, be disturbing and painful but also add a fresh and imaginative dimension to representations of mother love. Significantly, current depictions of the birthing mother also reflect a desire to establish ambivalence as a normal (as opposed to a dysfunctional) reaction to the transition to motherhood.<sup>36</sup>

Rozsika Parker's book *Torn in Two* considers ambivalence in motherhood from a psychoanalytic perspective, drawing on interviews with real-life mothers and clinical material from her practice as a psychotherapist. Parker defines maternal ambivalence as 'the concept developed by psychoanalysis according to which quite contradictory impulses and emotions towards the same person co-exist. The positive and negative components sit side by side and remain in opposition' (Parker, R., p.7). The concept of maternal ambivalence is not new within psychological discourse, having been

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<sup>34</sup> Adrienne Rich wrote of her feelings of ambivalence toward her children that, 'my children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have experienced. It is the suffering of ambivalence; the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, the blissful gratification and tenderness'. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976); (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), p.21.

<sup>35</sup> This quotation is taken from the book jacket of the first paperback edition of Rachel Cusk's memoir *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> See chapter one for a discussion of the birthing mother in *Gas and Air: Tales of Pregnancy, Birth and Beyond*, ed. by Jill Dawson and Margo Daly (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), hereafter GA.

discussed by Freud in 'Female Sexuality' (1931).<sup>37</sup> D.W. Winnicott famously developed the concept in his thesis 'Hate in the Countertransference' (1949).<sup>38</sup> Yet, Parker observes that, in general, 'it is a measure of the strength of our culture's denial of maternal ambivalence that this [concept] only rarely receives critical attention' (Parker, R., p.39). Hence, the recent cross-fertilisation of the psychological discourse of ambivalence with fictional representations and memoir of the mother from 1995-2010 is central to the discussion of motherhood at the turn of this century.<sup>39</sup>

What unites the memoirs and fictions of motherhood from this period, therefore, is a desire to establish maternal ambivalence as an accepted aspect of motherhood. However, in certain respects, fiction may be better suited to this purpose. It is ironic to note, for example, that Cusk's portrait of a loving mother making a difficult transition to motherhood attracted far more personal criticism of its author than that experienced by Shriver in relation to *Kevin*, published just over a year later. It seems that Shriver, as a childless writer of fiction, is freer to render the darkest imaginings of maternal ambivalence. And, whereas experiential accounts of motherhood are, unsurprisingly, situated mostly in domesticity, fiction can engage with a

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<sup>37</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Female Sexuality', Standard Edition, Vol.21 (1931); (London: Hogarth Press: 1953b), p.235.

<sup>38</sup> D.W. Winnicott in 'Hate in the Countertransference', asserts that the mother 'hates her infant from the word go. [He] believe[s] Freud thought it possible that a mother may in certain circumstances have only love for her baby boy; but we may doubt this. We know about a mother's love and we appreciate its reality and power. Let me give some of the reasons why a mother hates her baby, even a boy.' D.W. Winnicott, 'Hate in the Countertransference', in *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment* (1949); (London: Hogarth Press, 1979), p.201.

<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, recent motherhood representations appear to have been successful in placing maternal ambivalence on the popular cultural agenda, as evidenced by the recent screening of 'Parents Under Pressure' on mainstream television, presented by Sophie Raworth, concerning maternal failure to bond. 'Parents Under Pressure'. Dir. Terry Tyldesley. BBC 2. March 2011.

broader range of subject matter with impunity: adultery, the loss of a child, mass murder, for example.

The novels included in this thesis place ordinary fictional mothers in extraordinary circumstances. Cleave's *Incendiary* and Shriver's *Kevin* depict realistic, domestic portraits of motherhood set against discordant, terrifying narrative landscapes: these novelists offer an exaggerated, apocalyptic account of our postmodern society, one that is menaced by suicide bombers and random spree-killers. These mother narratives unfold to deliver intensifying degrees of horror: for example, Kevin blinds his sister, Celia, in one eye then returns her false eye to his mother following Celia's murder; in *Incendiary*, ordinary people attempt to burn each other to death in the street whilst attempting to escape a rumour of a dirty bomb in Parliament Square. Similarly, Julie Myerson's portrait of motherhood in *Something Might Happen* (2003) is ostensibly a murder mystery 'whodunit', focussing on the brutal murder of a mother who has her heart cut out in the village square.<sup>40</sup> Gregory's thriller *The Little House* explores the conflict between new and existing discourses of motherhood through the relationship between a new mother and her malevolent mother-in-law, and culminates in murder. Fiction, through its setting and plot, can realise the trauma and anxiety surrounding the transition to motherhood and the experience of maternal ambivalence.

Fiction can also draw upon established literary conventions, or genres, to help describe culturally difficult aspects of motherhood. These novels often

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<sup>40</sup> Julie Myerson, *Something Might Happen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), hereafter *SMH*.

exhibit features prominent in gothic fiction, for example.<sup>41</sup> The gothic tradition has long been utilised by writers seeking to depict gendered rage, protesting against the feminine mystique and patriarchal allocations of power; it also has a history of voicing inarticulate female fears of motherhood,<sup>42</sup> as well as expressing the divide between the authority's view and female experience.

In common with gothic heroines, the mother characters discussed in this thesis find themselves in alien, intimidating surroundings (a change in circumstance that echoes the transition from self to mother). Gregory's novel *The Little House* situates itself openly within the gothic, with Ruth, the mother-to-be, persuaded by her husband to leave her career and independent marital home in Bristol to live in a cottage within the grounds of his isolated "ancestral" home. The character of Ruth is also typical of the genre in other respects. At the beginning of the novel, she is depicted as innocent and passive, only dimly aware of the pervasive threat posed to her by her now ever-present, powerful and manipulative mother-in-law, Elizabeth.<sup>43</sup>

All these novels share gothic fiction's penchant for depicting extremes of emotion<sup>44</sup> (reflecting the highs and lows of the lived experience of

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<sup>41</sup> In the twentieth century, feminist writers also exploited the gothic's potential to critique a reality they perceived as male-dominated. See chapter one for a discussion of the novels of Fay Weldon, Penelope Mortimer and Doris Lessing.

<sup>42</sup> *The Female Gothic* divides its essays under the headings 'Mystique', 'Madness', 'Monsters', 'Maternity'. *The Female Gothic*, ed. by Juliann E. Fleenor (Montreal-London: Eden Press, 1983).

<sup>43</sup> Gothic fiction has also been read as a family romance (with an adolescent modelled heroine trying to oust an older female figure and win the love of a mysterious patriarchal male figure). This description is particular apt in the psychological dynamics of the relationship between Elizabeth, Ruth and Patrick. See chapter three for further discussion of the family romance.

<sup>44</sup> Current representations of maternal ambivalence embody extremes of emotion, similar to those expressed by Edmund Burke in his aesthetic theory of the sublime and the beautiful. Interestingly, Burke's theory forms part of the discussion of the literary gothic, a genre which embodies the thrills of fearfulness and awe inherent in the sublime. Burke argued that the sublime was brought about by terror or mental pain. At the other end of the continuum was the beautiful, which were those things that brought about pleasure and safety. Edmund



motherhood). These stories often combine the contrasting elements of romance and horror, which echo the descriptions of the joy of falling in love with a child and the fear of being consumed by it. The loneliness, isolation and powerlessness experienced by these mother characters, the feeling of suddenly being excluded from the dominant power system and of being scrutinised and menaced by potentially hostile “authorities” are all features embodied within the literary gothic.

It is significant, therefore, that in order to tell the “truth” about motherhood many of these writers choose to borrow from this genre. The disturbing settings, plot lines and horrific features of some of this fiction indicate the degree of anxiety and turmoil surrounding motherhood in this turn of the century literature.<sup>45</sup> Despite their different storylines, diverse methods of representation and variable quality, the accounts of motherhood discussed here (including autobiographical accounts) provide a “consistent” and “curious” insight into a particular concept of motherhood in a particular period of history. Factors that may have contributed to the anxiety and distress expressed in these texts (and what lies behind “the will to truth” demonstrated in this literature) are proposed and examined in this thesis.

My findings suggest, therefore, that current representations of the mother in both fiction and memoir present a portrait of motherhood which is opposed to the more traditional, sentimentalised picture of fulfilment, contentment and security embodied in the figure of the Madonna. O'Reilly

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Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844).

<sup>45</sup> This anxiety crosses disciplines. Tina Miller interviews real life mothers in the context of “late modernity” a period [that is] characterised by rapid changes and uncertainty’. Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.3.

observes this challenge to idealised motherhood in recent motherhood writing: 'each motherhood memoir', she asserts, 'in one way or another, seeks to "unmask" motherhood: to speak honestly, authentically of what it means to become and be a mother' (O'Reilly, p.209).<sup>46</sup> Motherhood writing is united in contesting an accepted, universal ideal of mothering, a model for goodness that depicts the mother as a figure of instinctual, instantaneous and self-sacrificing love. So, in describing these texts as mainstream literature does not suggest that they propound a mainstream depiction of motherhood. Maternal complaint still remains a minority voice in culture, since these texts were produced by particular writers for a particular audience (mainly educated, white, middle-income readers).

Inherent in the mainstream notion of the ideal mother is the persistence of the idea that she stays home to look after the children: as Pearson ironically observes, 'home is where the heart is. Home is where the good mother is, baking for her children' (*HSD*, p.3). Behind the challenge to the idealised mother in recent motherhood representations, therefore, is the perception of having been misled into motherhood by a belief in sexual equality. Simpson contends in her collection of short stories *Hey Yeah* that motherhood compels 'the free-standing, feisty girls' to cross 'the ego line',<sup>47</sup> and that this generation of new mothers is shocked to discover that they are not much better off than their predecessors.

Hence, a central aim of the motherhood literature from 1995-2010 is to expose the notion of equality for mothers as a "myth". Pearson's *How She*

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<sup>46</sup> O'Reilly is referring here to Susan Maushart's memoir, *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk About It* (1999).

<sup>47</sup> Helen Simpson, 'Hey Yeah Right Get A Life', in *HY*, pp.20-58, p.37

*Does It* presents the dilemma of working motherhood at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and has been described by Oprah Winfrey as 'a Bible for the working woman'.<sup>48</sup> Fiction of this period focuses on those mothers (for example, Dorrie in Simpson's *Hey Yeah*, Ruth in Gregory's *The Little House*, Eva in Shriver's *Kevin*, Tonie in Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations*)<sup>49</sup> who are forced to relinquish careers that they enjoy in order to look after their children. Writing in 2011, Cusk reinforces the belief that this generation has failed "to have it all".<sup>50</sup> Contextualizing the breakdown of her marriage within the difficulties that confront a family in which the woman continues to pursue a career after having children, she examines her resentment at her ex-husband's attitude to staying at home to look after the family whilst she continues to work:

I earned the money in our household, did my share of the cooking and the cleaning, paid someone to look after the children while I worked, picked them up from school when they were older. And my husband helped. It was his phrase, and still is: he helped me. I was the compartmentalised modern woman, the woman having it all, and he helped me to have it. But I didn't want help: I wanted equality.

('Aftermath', p.24)

Memoir and fiction reveal that inequality is endemic in motherhood and is a major contributory factor to feelings of maternal ambivalence.

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<sup>48</sup> Oprah Winfrey's quotation is taken from the book jacket of the paperback edition (2003) of Allison Pearson's novel *I Don't Know How She Does It* (London: Vintage, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Rachel Cusk, *The Bradshaw Variations* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), hereafter *BV*.

<sup>50</sup> Rachel Cusk, 'Aftermath', *Granta*, Spring 2011, pp.9-29, hereafter 'Aftermath'.

The memoir and novels discussed in this thesis, therefore, share a didactic intention to fill the gap that Susan Faludi identified in 1993 as having ‘developed between women’s lib and women’s lit’.<sup>51</sup> For those who believe that literature should be a purely imaginative act, the relationship in these texts between art and political ideology is problematic, since the two are portrayed in them as inextricably linked.<sup>52</sup> Carol Hanisch in 1970 coined the now famous phrase ‘the personal is political’<sup>53</sup> and nowhere is this notion more germane than in the recent representations of motherhood. In the introduction to *A Life’s Work*, Cusk asserts that ‘the issue of children and who looks after them has become, in my view, profoundly political, and so it would be a contradiction to write a book about motherhood without explaining to some degree how I found the time to write it’ (*ALW*, p.5).

The ideological debates in the texts discussed in this thesis are part of the realism of motherhood, reflecting the real life concerns of women. When considering the connections between art and life, textual representations that seek to reveal the “truth” about motherhood, also clearly hope to influence the realities of women and their families for the better, as well as to render women’s experiences of motherhood. Rozsika Parker argues that, at the very least, the mother memoir offers art as a form of therapy, providing mothers with ‘deeply-needed reassurance’ (Parker, R., p.1). Cusk appears to concur with Parker’s contention, stating in *A Life’s Work* that, ‘for now, this is a letter,

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Faludi, Afterword to Marilyn French, *The Women’s Room* (1977); (London: Virago Press, 2009), p.518.

<sup>52</sup> It is difficult to separate literature (as a pure act of imagination) from life. Hirsch asserts that the novel is ‘the optimal genre in which to study the interplay between hegemonic and dissenting voices and a site on which ideologies are both inscribed and queried’ (Hirsch, p.9).

<sup>53</sup> Maggie Humm, ‘History of Feminism in Britain and America’, *Feminisms: A Reader*, ed. by Maggie Humm (Harlow: Longman, 1992), pp.1-4 (p.1).

addressed to those women who care to read it, in the hope that they find some companionship in my experiences' (ALW, p.10).

It is evident from the memoir and some of the fiction discussed here that these authors are writing to exercise a degree of agency that is denied the real-life mother as a social, cultural and political subject - to purge the trauma associated with the transition to motherhood and to identify what underlies maternal ambivalence. Hence, the focus of recent writing is most often the unanticipated cultural and social restrictions experienced by the mother, with less emphasis placed on describing caring for and loving a child. Where this aspect of motherhood is discussed, it is often contextualised in how the social injustices of motherhood have had a detrimental impact on mother-child bonding.

Patrice DiQuinzio challenges the idea that the maternal memoir can offer a useful source of maternal insight because of what she calls 'the paradox of representation'.<sup>54</sup> a contention which can also extend to fiction. The paradox of representation, according to Domna Stanton, is the view that 'either we name and become entrapped in the structures of the already named; or else we do not name and remained trapped in passivity, powerlessness, and a perpetuation of the same'.<sup>55</sup> This opinion belongs to 'a strong feminist critique of "experience" as always already constructed, embedded in cultural norms and expectations – impossible to free from the

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<sup>54</sup> Patrice DiQuinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problem of Mothering* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p.226.

<sup>55</sup> Domna Stanton quoted in Kristi Siegel, *Women's Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), p.153.

interpretive frameworks that we all inherit from our culture' (Frye, p.190).<sup>56</sup>

The position of the social constructionists in feminist theory is best expressed in Simone de Beauvoir's contention that 'one is not born a woman, but becomes one'.<sup>57</sup>

However, memoir and fiction of the period does attempt to offer more than a polemic, since these texts also seek to salvage the pleasures of mothering from the restrictive institution of motherhood. Cusk acknowledges the artistic difficulties inherent in such a project: 'in motherhood a woman exchanges her public significance for a range of private meanings, and like sounds outside a certain range they can be very difficult for other people to identify' (*ALW*, p.3). Elucidating these 'private meanings' is problematic for those writers who attempt to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism. Frye contends that

though some maternal memoirs do participate in perpetuating essentialism and gender dichotomies, [she] find[s] in a select group [including Cusk] the ability of language and narrative form to extend our understanding of the actual lives of women who mother and to initiate

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<sup>56</sup> Frye discusses the paradox of representation in 'Narrating Maternal Subjectivity' (2010) and includes these references to DiQuinzio and Stanton, p.190.

<sup>57</sup> Simone de Beauvoir quoted by Fuss in *Feminisms*, p.250. The fiction and memoir of this period reflects the complex and often contradictory views within feminism over how femininity is produced, expressing confusion as to whether motherhood is instinctual or a form of identity that is "learned". For an essentialist, woman is born not made; for an anti-essentialist like Simone de Beauvoir, woman is made, not born. This debate polarised second-wave feminism, with Diana Fuss acknowledging that she felt compelled to write her book *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* by the desire to 'break or in some way weaken the hold which the essentialist/constructionist binarism has on feminist theory'. Diana Fuss, 'The "Risk" of Essence', in *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp.1-22, reprinted in *Feminisms*, ed. by Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.250-58 (p.251).

alternative understandings that resist the hazardous cultural constructions with which we continue to wrestle. (Frye, p.188)

Similarly, Suzanne Juhasz argues for the artistic merit of the mother memoir, asserting that 'writing can serve as an agent for constructing maternal subjectivity, because the transitional space of language allows for representation that is inventive as well as mimetic. Art is not exactly like life because it can transform as well as describe'.<sup>58</sup> Podnieks and O'Reilly's summation provides the best description of the relationship between art and politics illustrated in recent motherhood literature: 'mothering and being a mother are political, personal and creative narratives unfolding within both the pages of a book and the spaces in life' (Podnieks and O'Reilly, p.2).

The political dimension of maternal representation is apparent in the way in which these texts engage with or reflect feminist ideologies; 'self and other, mind and body, public and private, nature and culture – and, of course, male and female' (Frye, p.190). Most significant to this thesis, however, is that the eruption of maternal dissatisfaction in mainstream fiction from 1995 onwards can be understood in terms of a backlash against current postfeminist culture.<sup>59</sup> Angela McRobbie asserts that 'postfeminism positively

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<sup>58</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, 'Mother-Writing and the Narrative of Maternal Subjectivity', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 4.4 (2003), 395-425 (p.422), cited in Frye, p.193.

<sup>59</sup> Gamble asserts that the term postfeminism 'originated from within the media in the early 1980s, and has always tended to be used in this context as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement'. Sarah Gamble, 'Postfeminism', in Gamble, pp.43-54 (p.44). Outside of this context, however, the term postfeminism has, to a degree, been reclaimed from connotations of anti-feminism by feminists such as Judith Stacey, for whom the term means 'postrevolutionary'. For Stacey, postfeminism does not 'indicate the death of the women's movement but [...] describe[s] the simultaneous incorporation, revision and de-politicisation of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism'. Judith Stacey, 'Sexism by a Subtler Name?: Postindustrial

draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings, which emphasise that it is no longer needed, that it is a spent force'.<sup>60</sup>

Part of the reason why these texts attempt to expose the truth about motherhood is that, away from the academy, there exists a general assumption that a cultural, as well as a statutory, equality for women has been achieved.<sup>61</sup> Writing a revised foreword to her infamous novel *The Women's Room* (1977) in 1992, Marilyn French reflects on the fact that her novel

is now considered a classic, a given – known, digested, assimilated, no longer threatening [which] suggests that conditions have changed for women since 1977. And this is true. Feminist activism has generated major changes for women in law, custom and climate. Young educated women today have opportunities that were rare or unknown to women of my generation – in education, professional, social, and economic life. They now obtain scholarships to college, are admitted to graduate law, and medical schools, are permitted to practise in hospitals and law firms, contract debt to buy cars or houses, and to get a telephone in their own names – something I was denied when I was divorced in 1968. In other words, educated

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Conditions and Postfeminist Consciousness in Silicon Valley', *Socialist Review*, 96 (1987), 7-28 (p.8).

<sup>60</sup> Angela McRobbie, 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp.26-39 (p.28).

<sup>61</sup> In this thesis, I engage with perceptions pervasive enough to have been instrumental in creating a generalised, accepted view of what it means to be a mother at the turn of this century. Therefore, I focus more on the postfeminism endemic in popular culture, rather than the postfeminism debated within the academy.



women in western countries can now choose their own lives; they are not forced into dependency on a man, as they had been for Millennia. (French, p.vii)

French is expressing an understanding that, in western countries at least, the work of feminism has had effect: that we are living post 'the post-feminist '90s' (French, p.522).

Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra observe a similar complacency, asserting that 'popular culture blithely assumes that gender equality is a given'.<sup>62</sup> They argue that postfeminist culture has actively contributed to this presumption: 'postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the "pastness of feminism", whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned or celebrated' (Tasker and Negra, p.1).<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Cusk laments feminism's apparent demise, noting that 'feminism as a cultural and political crisis is seen to have passed' ('Shakespeare's daughters', p.5).<sup>64</sup>

Postfeminist culture denies feminism's relevance by emphasising the concept of female *choice*, be it in the form of educational and professional opportunities, physical and sexual empowerment or freedom of choice in

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<sup>62</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'Introduction', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp.1-25 (p.12), hereafter Tasker and Negra.

<sup>63</sup> Tasker and Negra differentiate between 'postfeminism as a popular idiom and third-wave feminism as a more scholarly category' (p.19). They consider that 'the contradictory aspects of postfeminist discourse relate to its resolutely popular character; that is, the term has been generated and primarily deployed outside of the academy, lacking the rigour we expect of scholarly work' (Tasker and Negra, p.19). They also observe a distinction between postfeminist politics and postfeminist culture, noting that postfeminist political discourses 'rarely express the explicit view that feminist politics have been rejected: rather it is by virtue of feminism's success that it is seen to be superseded' (Tasker and Negra, p.5).

<sup>64</sup> Gamble cautions against being 'too optimistic and [...] tak[ing] one's own privileged position as representative, which can lead to the conclusion that the time for feminism is past, and that those who still cling to activist principles are deluded and fanatical' (Gamble, p.53).

relation to work, domesticity and parenting. The latter's inclusion is window dressing, however, for postfeminist culture's fascination is with the "girl", as opposed to the mother. Tasker and Negra state that 'postfeminism has raised the premium on youthfulness' adding that 'postfeminist representational culture is, of course, acutely age conscious' (Tasker and Negra, p.11). They list a variety of "chick" fictions that celebrate the postmodern Miss, from *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) and *Sex and the City* (1996) to *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1997),<sup>65</sup> and argue that

to some extent, a focus on the girl results not only on the pervasive representations of girlhood and girliness but from the extent to which generational metaphors are so central to postfeminism. Both helpful and limiting, the generational construction of girls and young women as enjoying the freedoms secured by the activism of their mothers and grandmothers is a repeated trope of postfeminist culture. (Tasker and Negra, p.18)<sup>66</sup>

Sarah Gamble also observes 'the problematical dynamics of intergenerational relationships [in] the phenomenon known as postfeminism' in 'Growing up single: the postfeminist novel'.<sup>67</sup> Commenting on the

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<sup>65</sup> Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London: Picador, 1996); Candace Bushnell, *Sex and the City* (1996); (London: Abacus, 1997). 'Sex and the City' also became a hugely successful television series, created by Darren Star. Dir. Michael Patrick King. HBO. 1998-2004; Terry McMillan, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (London: Signet, 1997).

<sup>66</sup> See also L.S. Kim's examination of "single girl" television narratives. L.S. Kim, 'Sex and the Single Girl in Postfeminism: The F Word on Television', *Television and New Media*, 2.4 (2001), 319-34.

<sup>67</sup> In 'Growing up single' Gamble engages with Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1992) as part of her discussion. Gamble humorously contends that viewed through the cynical eyes of Faludi and Brenda Polen, 'postfeminism is

conventional practice for postfeminist publications to include the birth date of their authors on the dust jacket,<sup>68</sup> she elaborates on the reasons with reference to Rene Denfeld's *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (1995):<sup>69</sup>

while [Denfeld's] mother had to acquire feminism, Denfeld was born to it, and that assumption leads to a reversal of the mother/daughter relationship, the result of which is to deprive the mother of authority. For Denfeld, age does not bring wisdom. Instead, throughout [*The New Victorians*] she portrays second-wave feminist ideology as stale, outmoded, and dogmatic and juxtaposes it against a postfeminism that is at once vital and pragmatic, possessing a dynamism that its precursor has long since lost. ('Single', p.1)

Significantly for discussions of the mother, postfeminism deprives *this* generation's mother of authority as well. By selecting the single girl as the pinup for sexual equality, postfeminist culture neatly sidesteps 'or transcends institutional and social problem spots' (Tasker and Negra, p.10). Like the

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not a striking out for independence so much as a teenage tantrum, a fruitless rebellion engaged in merely for its own sake. This carries with it a great risk, however, for in striking out against the ideology of their foremothers, postfeminists threaten to disrupt the fragile edifice of liberation upon which their own privileges so precariously rest'. Sarah Gamble, 'Growing up single: the postfeminist novel', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 38.1 (2005) <<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-172906651.html/print>> [accessed 9 October 2011] (p.2), hereafter 'Single'.

<sup>68</sup> Gamble observes that 'it is important for us to know that, for example, Naomi Wolf was born in 1962, Natasha Walter in 1967, Katie Roiphe in 1968, precisely because their postfeminist credentials rest on their identity not just as women but as young women who have grown up under feminism and thus accept it as an incontrovertible part of their cultural landscape' ('Single', p.1).

<sup>69</sup> Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (New York: Warner Books Edition, 1995).

heroine in a Romance, the postfeminist girl's story stops short before the going gets tough. For motherhood and domesticity expose 'the limits of the kind of gender equality enacted within contemporary popular media culture' (Tasker and Negra, p.1): a culture that offers 'a valorisation of female achievement within traditionally male working environments' (Tasker and Negra, p.1).

Many of the recent representations of the mother express a sense of shock and outrage at being suddenly excluded from the status of "honorary boy" and its associated freedoms, by maternity and children. Cusk acknowledges her own surprise in *A Life's Work*: 'I did not understand what a challenge to the concept of sexual equality the experience of pregnancy and childbirth is' (*ALW*, p.6). Cusk later admits 'to her lack of appreciation of the degree to which her equality was contingent on her ability to 'assimilate herself with man' ('Shakespeare's daughters', p.5). She argues that 'marriage, motherhood and domesticity' reveal the superficial and transitory nature of current female equality, which currently exists only 'within the domination of "masculine values"' ('Shakespeare's daughters', p.5). In *A Life's Work*, she cautions other would-be mothers that 'child birth and motherhood is the anvil upon which sexual inequality was forged, and the women in our society whose responsibilities, expectations and experience are like those of men are right to approach it with trepidation' (*ALW*, p.8). This sense of surprise at the inequity of motherhood is also pervasive in the fictions considered in this thesis. Simpson's 'Café Society' expresses a mother's bewilderment at the sudden change in her circumstances following the birth of her child: 'why do they educate us [...] only to make it so hard for us to work

afterwards? Why don't they insist on hysterectomies for girls who want further education and have done with it?'.<sup>70</sup> It is perhaps a testament to the strength of postfeminist culture that the fact that its freedoms do not extend to the mother seems to have become a best kept secret.

O'Reilly accounts for the explosion of maternal dissatisfaction in literature as a coming of age of third-wave feminists:

In 2000, the first group of third-wave feminists turned 35 and began having children [...] most did not become mothers until their mid to late thirties at the turn of the millennium. Indeed, a review of current third-wave writings reveals a baby boom among third-wavers. These women, who were thinking and writing about other feminist issues in the 1980s and 1990s, turned their attention to motherhood as they became mothers themselves: hence, the appearance and appeal of "mommy lit" over the last seven to eight years. (O'Reilly, p.205)<sup>71</sup>

I believe that there is another dimension to this contention, however. The emergence of maternal literature reflects a rare moment of conflation between third-wave feminist concerns and the dashing of postfeminist expectations. Many of those writing about motherhood are contemporaneous with their fictional counterparts, Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw. Indeed, Gamble

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<sup>70</sup> Helen Simpson, 'Café Society', *HY*, pp.10-20 (p.18).

<sup>71</sup> Wilkinson and Niesslein offer an alternative (although related) perspective on the recent explosion in maternal texts: 'this generation of mothers is the first to have grown up with the women's movement of the seventies in progress. At least some of us were told from the get go that our opinions matter, that our experiences are valid. Growing up with the same sense of entitlement as our brothers played out in all sorts of well-documented ways. One less documented way that today's women's sense of entitlement has played out is in publishing. If football coaches and fishing enthusiasts could pen books about their experiences, why not mothers?' (Wilkinson and Niesslein, p.5), cited in Podnieks and O'Reilly, p.204.

observes that 'the generation postfeminism claims to represent is also known as the "Bridget Jones generation"' ('Single', p.3).<sup>72</sup> Postfeminist culture has centred on 'an affluent elite': certain women within privileged educational and professional groups sharing the same demographic as those engaged in exposing the "truth" about motherhood today. Perhaps, then, a contributory factor in the growth of maternal literature between 1995 and 2010 is that the postfeminist girl has become a woman. Unsurprisingly, these writers are dismayed at finding that 'postfeminist culture, with its enhanced but peculiarised female visibility' (Tasker and Negra, p.16) takes no account of the mother and have set themselves the difficult creative project 'of portraying adult women within postfeminist culture' (Tasker and Negra, p.18).

The recent explosion in maternal fiction and memoir suggests a trajectory from "chick lit" to "mummy lit".<sup>73</sup> It also signals a return to more second and (some) third-wave feminist concerns. These texts reflect and debate the contradictory ideologies of social constructionist theory and essentialism, for example. Current fiction and memoir also describes the mother as a victim of a patriarchal culture: a position at odds with the political ideology of postfeminism. Gamble describes postfeminism as 'crystallis[ing] around issues of victimisation, autonomy and responsibility [and] is critical of any definition of women as victims who are unable to control their own lives' (Gamble, p.44). Recent motherhood literature highlights second-wave

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<sup>72</sup> Gamble observes that 'the mass-produced literary genre now widely known as "chicklit" contains many of postfeminism's conventions as well as its problems: most notably, it is similarly concerned with defining the aims and aspirations of the modern young woman who has grown to maturity in a world inescapably influenced by second-wave feminism and who thus sees herself as facing dilemmas which lie outside the experience of a previous generation of women' ('Single', p.2).

<sup>73</sup> By this token, it is interesting to note that Sarah Jessica Parker, who played postfeminist icon Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City* has recently starred as the working mother Kate Reddy in the film adaptation of Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It*.

feminist concerns that motherhood, as a patriarchal institution, is detrimental to women.

So whereas 'postfeminist representation typically celebrates women's strength' (Tasker and Negra, p.21), current motherhood writing most often portrays the mother as patriarchy's victim. And whereas postfeminism theorises female achievement as 'predicated not on feminism but on "female individualism"', these texts challenge the idea of individual responsibility when it comes to accounting for feelings of maternal ambivalence. It is an uncompromising patriarchal culture that is depicted as at fault for producing an impoverished mothering experience. Recent representations of motherhood also rebut the individualism associated with postfeminism's 'tropes of freedom and choice' (McRobbie, p.27). These mother writers and characters expose the 'comfortable zone [beyond feminism] where women are now free to choose for themselves' (McRobbie, p.33) as a cultural fabrication, depicting motherhood as greatly restricting choice in a woman's life. In so doing, they also expose the assumption of 'full economic freedom for women' (Tasker and Negra, p.2).<sup>74</sup>

Significantly, these books are reaching out into the void perceived to have been vacated by feminism<sup>75</sup> – to other mothers *like them*. Whereas the second-wave feminism of the 1970s and 1980s articulated the concerns expressed in these novels and memoir, third-wave feminism crucially marks

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<sup>74</sup> Tasker and Negra also observe that 'postfeminist culture's insistence that women might choose to retreat from the public world of work dovetails closely with a heightened social and economic emphasis on showplace domesticity [and] virtuoso parenting' (Tasker and Negra, p.7).

<sup>75</sup> Maureen Freely articulates the same sense of frustration expressed in the recent memoir and fictional accounts of mothering. Maureen Freely, *What About Us!: An Open Letter to the Mothers Feminism Forgot* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995).

(in the words of Ann Brooks)<sup>76</sup> 'a conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates about difference'.<sup>77</sup> The novels and memoir from 1995-2010 can be seen, therefore, as a response to the third-wave's celebration of difference (with the obvious exception of Roy's *Small Things*), and as a rejection of postfeminism's individualism. This fiction and memoir exhibits a tendency toward the notion of a white, middle-class sisterhood, reminiscent of second-wave feminism. Whilst not initiating the formation of an actual group, these texts engage in "consciousness raising" and offer the opportunity to enjoy experiential commonality and the sensation of solidarity through the camaraderie of reading (with virtual forums such as Mumsnet also fulfilling a similar need).

This thesis argues that these writers are attempting to articulate motherhood in an ideological hiatus that exists between culturally endemic postfeminism and a marginalised third-wave feminism.<sup>78</sup> Whereas second and (some) third-wave feminism's scholarly efforts attempt to address some of the issues identified in recent fiction and memoir, postfeminist culture has

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<sup>76</sup> Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory, and Cultural Forms* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.4.

<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Amanda D. Lotz observes that Ednie Kaeh Garrison, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake 'also particularly attend to the emphasis of differences among women as a characteristic of third-wave feminism'. Amanda D. Lotz, 'Theorising the Intermezzo', in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (2004); (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.71-84 (p.75). Lotz also cites the work of Ann Books, p.74

<sup>78</sup> Imelda Whelehan argues in her foreword to *Third Wave Feminism* (2004) that 'the third-wavers, as I understand them in all their contradictory multiplicity' (p.xv) 'differ [...] and mould [...] to as many identities as there are practitioners and thinkers' (p.xviii). This lack of coherence (apart from a shared belief that feminism is not "owned" by any particular group) impedes identification with this "wave" as a political force.



successfully silenced feminism's voice.<sup>79</sup> In interview, Lionel Shriver, author of *Kevin*, owned, regretfully, to having become

uneasy with the label "feminist", which is unfortunate. What the word means on the face of it I should be able to embrace. But the connotations of the term have soured. These days if you say you are a feminist people hear that you are A) ugly, B) probably a dyke, C) shrill, touchy and eager to bring you to book on some minor infraction of political correctness, and – worst of all in my view; D) utterly lacking a sense of humour'.<sup>80</sup>

Tasker and Negra concur with Shriver's invocation of how feminism is currently perceived in culture, identifying postfeminism as a major contributor to feminism's negative image:

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<sup>79</sup> The recent explosion in maternal literature begs the question of why these writers feel compelled to expose the truth about motherhood when second and third-wave feminists have been earnestly deconstructing the cultural myth of the ideal self-sacrificing mother for decades. This feminist project has been shaped by influential studies such as Elisabeth Badinter's *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of Maternal Instinct* (London: Souvenir Press, 1981), Ann Dally's *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal* (London: Burnett, 1982), Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto's 'The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother' in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, ed. by Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom (New England: Northeastern University Press, 1992), Shari L. Thurer's *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), Aminatta Forna's *Mother of All Myths: How Society Moulds and Constrains Mothers* (London: HarperCollins, 1998) and Susan Douglas and Meredith Michael's *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined All Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005). This work has approached the mother from a variety of disciplines, sharing a desire to expose as culturally-constructed dominant representations of motherhood (those that depict the mother as instantly maternal, nurturing and self-sacrificing). This thesis argues that recent fiction and memoir is responding to a cultural assumption that sexual equality for women has been achieved: an assumption which is out-of-step with the social and political reality experienced by real-life mothers and exposed by the scholarly efforts of second and third-wave feminists.

<sup>80</sup> Andrew Lawless, 'We Need to Talk About Kevin - Lionel Shriver in Interview' in *Three Monkey's Online* (May 2005)  
[http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/als/we\\_need\\_to\\_talk\\_about\\_kevin\\_lionel\\_shriver\\_interview.html](http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/als/we_need_to_talk_about_kevin_lionel_shriver_interview.html) > [accessed 26 October 2011] (p.3)

postfeminism draws on and sustains an invented social memory of feminist language as inevitably shrill, bellicose, and parsimonious. Thus, while feminism is constituted as an unwelcome, implicitly censorious presence, it is precisely *feminist* concerns that are silenced within postfeminist culture. Reference to “the F word” underscores the status of feminism as unspeakable within contemporary popular culture. (Tasker and Negra, p.3)

Hence, the barriers to equality are now as much cultural as legal. We face a situation where earnest, scholarly work by feminists on the inequitable status of the mother in western society continues to take place within the academy, whilst, culturally, postfeminism has successfully silenced these concerns by diminishing feminism’s credibility. McRobbie asserts that ‘the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom’ (McRobbie, p.32).

The voice of protest rising up from the writers of motherhood of the 1990s onwards breaks this embargo. Current motherhood fiction and memoir is responding to a gap between *cultural postfeminist* depictions of femininity and the life lived by the real life mother, refuting the notion that we are living in a postfeminist moment. These texts are reacting to what Kathleen Karlyn describes as one of the biggest challenges in the academy: a coming to grips with generational impasses when ‘feminism itself seems most evident as a

“structuring absence” for middleclass young women’.<sup>81</sup> The concerns raised by these texts serve as a rebuttal of postfeminism and may also suggest a backlash reaction to third-wave efforts to make feminism represent more than a class of privileged white women.

On re-reading French's novel *The Women's Room* in 1992, Faludi<sup>82</sup> was both

impressed and distressed, most by the novel's awful relevance to our times. I had hoped for signs of outmodedness, but the same damn problems French identifies are still with us: the failure of men to take part in the life of the home, the absence of women from the halls of public power [....] the general lack of respect for women's needs and demands. (Faludi, p.526)<sup>83</sup>

There exists, therefore, a curiously dated feel to the debate surrounding motherhood in current fiction and memoir. While E. Ann Kaplan observed in 1992 the outdated nature of the debates that are reflected in depictions of the mother, commenting on ‘the dominant motherhood discourses that have been

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<sup>81</sup> Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, ‘Scream, Popular Culture, and Feminism's Third Wave: “I'm Not My Mother”’ in *Genders Journal Online*, 38 (2003)

<[http://www.genders.org/g38/g38\\_karlyn.txt](http://www.genders.org/g38/g38_karlyn.txt)>[accessed 9 November 2011] (para. 5).

<sup>82</sup> Gamble argues that Faludi's notion of backlash ‘replaces postfeminism's notion of itself as representing a straight track to the image of a better future with the image of postfeminism as a curved line, a U turn back to the very inequitable status quo which feminism had attempted to overthrow’ (Single, p.2).

<sup>83</sup> The Equality and Human Rights Commission has reported that progress in closing the gender pay gap appears to be ‘grinding to a halt’. Their report entitled *How Fair is Britain: Equality and Human Rights Commission Triennial Review* (released 11 October 2010) found that on average women earned 16% less than men, widening to 27% for women aged 40. This pay gap was contributed to by women taking a break from work to have children.

<[http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/triennial\\_review/how\\_fair\\_is\\_britain\\_-\\_complete\\_report.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/triennial_review/how_fair_is_britain_-_complete_report.pdf)> [assessed 17 April 2011]

archaic since at least the 1960s and that [are] still part of current debates',<sup>84</sup> Podnieks and O'Reilly similarly confirm in 2010 that their research has revealed that 'recent motherhood writing depicts the disparity between the persistence of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century ideological conceptions and lived realities of mothering, conflicts that exist in our supposedly "postfeminist" era today' (Podnieks and O'Reilly, p.14). The choice of theoretical texts discussed in this thesis was, therefore, dictated by the nature of the debates discovered in the literature of motherhood from the period 1995-2010. Pervasive themes in this fiction and memoir include the myth of equality in motherhood, the persecutory demands of the selfless ideal mother, the nature of mother love and female experience.

To understand representations of the mother in fiction and memoir *now*, therefore, past depictions are as important as *new* ones. This study identifies areas of change and of stasis in current fictional depictions of motherhood, whilst considering these changes in relation to the political and philosophical feminism arising from the key decades in the twentieth century that helped to inspire them. Past literary representations of the mother are also considered, as fictional portraits contribute to the mother's image in the public consciousness, either by way of comparison or contrast, acceptance or rejection. Although representations of the mother can be traced back to the beginnings of literature, my interest in this thesis is in how those writing about motherhood in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century respond to the historical period immediately preceding their own. Chapter one, therefore,

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<sup>84</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.16.

compares influential fictions of the twentieth century, including novels by celebrated writers such as D.H. Lawrence, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing and Fay Weldon, with novels and memoirs from 1995 onwards that feature prominent depictions of motherhood.

As part of the discussion on how writers (and their characters) have absorbed certain “truths” about motherhood, chapter two considers the influence of the work of Michel Foucault (1926-84). Foucault sought to discover how and why certain statements come to count as “true” or “false” in a given culture. In common with postmodern ideas popularised in the 1970s and 1980s, he contested the concept that language represents “the real”. Foucault argues that conventions of what can and cannot be seen as true are determined by social and cultural discourses, which are in turn shaped by history. Foucault’s conceptualisation of discourse is pertinent to understanding representations of the mother, therefore, as his work has helped to shape how motherhood has been approached as a theoretical subject. His ideas on discourse coalesced with feminist methodology to create an understanding of the ideal mother figure as a social construct that endures to this day.

The second chapter will also consider how the “exacting” nature of Foucault’s work has the potential, paradoxically, to undermine not only the social constructionist feminist critiques of the mother it helped to nourish, but also those writing creatively about the mother following the postmodern challenge to “the truth”. The chapter discusses Shriver’s *Kevin* and Cleave’s *Incendiary*, exploring how contemporary fiction engages with the difficulties of mothering in a historical moment when the ideas of Foucault and Jacques

Derrida (amongst others) have 'abolished truth, morality and reality and left behind [them] nothing but the infinite play of language'.<sup>85</sup> The connection between certain postmodern ideas and Shriver's and Cleave's re-imagining of motherhood in a world without meaning is investigated. These stories are situated against backdrops of menace. In *Kevin*, the reader enters a vision of a lost and empty postmodern consumer society, traumatised by a spate of school shootings. In Cleave's novel, *Incendiary*, London is plunged into chaos after al-Qaeda blows up the Emirates Stadium.<sup>86</sup> In the blast, the mother of the story loses her husband and son and feels compelled to write a letter to Osama Bin Laden, appealing to his humanity: 'I am a mother Osama. I just want you to love my son. What could be more natural?' (*I*, p.4). These novels lament a perceived loss of certainty, expressing a desire that runs antithetical to Foucault's theorisation of, as Hayden White puts it, 'a series of negations', [resisting] 'the lure of any definitive ending [...] and intimations of the folly underlying any "will to know"'.<sup>87</sup>

So, while chapter one proposes that ideas of what is *natural* and *instinctive* in motherhood have been shaken by the anti-essentialist debate of second-wave feminism, chapter two investigates the extent to which the postmodern challenge to the truth is reflected in depictions of motherhood in the new millennium. Both these chapters engage with political and philosophical ideas that have the potential to undermine the pleasures traditionally associated with motherhood.

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<sup>85</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'Look Left, Look Right', *Guardian*, 20 October 1992, pp.22-24, p.22.

<sup>86</sup> Similarly, in *Gas and Air*, Emily Perkin's short story 'Little Hearts' (2001) portrays a mother-to-be terrorised by an old school bully and anxious over a recent spate of bomb scares. Emily Perkins, 'Little Hearts' in *GA*, pp. 9-25.

<sup>87</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p.107.

Hence, chapter three explores the changing nature of motherhood's pleasures as depicted in literature. The discussion is situated outside the culturally sanctioned discourses on mothering, in an attempt to discover how literature presents motherhood's "authentic" pleasures. This alternative line of enquiry has been driven by the supposition that if a pleasure persists outside 'the auspices of the father or the state' (Kaplan, p.16) and carries with it the risk of censure, it must be entirely, in the words of Rich, 'of woman born'.<sup>88</sup> The taboo subject of mother-child sensuality is considered and, to facilitate this discussion, this chapter engages with psychoanalytical theory. By way of illustrating how Freud's individuation theory has developed within the literary imagination, D.H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913) is compared to depictions of mother-child romance within contemporary fiction.<sup>89</sup> What Rozsika Parker describes as the 'fantasy of oneness' (Parker, R., p.27) is explored with reference to the work of Nancy Chodorow<sup>90</sup> and Janice Radway.<sup>91</sup> This third chapter argues that there is a discernable development in the nature of the depiction of the mother-child romance, discussing the trend in recent fiction for the mother to turn away physically from both child and father in response to the unrealistic expectations of patriarchal restrictions in culture.

In chapter four, the argument broadens into wider considerations of the problematic nature of sexual desire in mothers, in line with the assertion of

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<sup>88</sup> This phrase is taken from the title of Rich's influential feminist polemic *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976).

<sup>89</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (1913); (London: Heinemann: Secker & Warburg, 1985), hereafter *SL*.

<sup>90</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>91</sup> Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers (in *Mothers & Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives* [2001]) who suggest that 'the pursuit of sexual gratification [...] is antithetical to the kind of altruism expected of mothers'.<sup>92</sup> The fictional fates of adulterous mothers (for example Tess in Myerson's *Something Might Happen*, the nameless mother in Cleave's *Incendiary*, Tonie in Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations* and Margaret and Ammu in Roy's *Small Things*) are discussed in terms of the duty of care a mother owes to her children and the conflict that might arise between this duty and sexual desire.<sup>93</sup> This chapter explores motherhood, therefore, from an ethical perspective. Motherhood, for many, implies a system of values and universal principles concerned with the distinction between right and wrong, good and bad behaviour.

This final chapter examines the view that a cultural propensity towards judging mothers has resulted in an over-simplification of motherhood, a loss in terms of understanding motherhood's meaning and value. This sample of recent fiction and memoir serves to reverse the cultural predilection for

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<sup>92</sup> Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers, eds., *Mothers & Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p.32.

<sup>93</sup> Specific instances of British, North American and Indian experiences of mothering also form part of the discussion in this thesis, on the basis that in certain circumstances a character's experience transcends cultural differences. The taboo that surrounds sex and the mother, to a degree, crosses cultures and on this basis the discussion includes Roy's *The God of Small Things*. This novel offers depictions of sexually active Western and Eastern mothers. I discuss these characters in line with Barthes's assertion about the nature of narrativity. He contends that narrativity fashions 'human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific. We may not be able fully to comprehend specific thought patterns of another culture, but we have relatively less difficulty understanding a story coming from another culture, however exotic that culture may appear to us'. As Barthes says, 'narrative is translatable without fundamental damage'. Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), p.79, cited by White, p.1. Clare Scobie's review of *Small Things* in the *Daily Telegraph* confirms Barthes's contention: 'it is rare to find a book that so effectively cuts through the clothes of nationality, caste and religion to reveal the bones of humanity'. This quotation is taken from the book jacket of the 1998 paperback edition of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1997).



judging mothers, by promoting an understanding of the difficulties of motherhood in the twenty-first century. David Parker believes that non-judgementalism is not merely an abstract possibility, but 'one which is part of this culture's milieu and identity'.<sup>94</sup> By locating their fiction and memoir within this tradition, these writers engender a spirit of ethical commonality in their readers; their literature encourages a more complex, ethical appreciation of motherhood.

The desire to express the moral depth and complexity of motherhood that inspired these writers reflects the turn to ethics in literary criticism. Yet, for reasons proposed in this thesis, these writers' creative explorations of motherhood do not emphasise motherhood as rich and multi-faceted; the myth of equality for mothers and the restrictions that motherhood places on women's lives is depicted as distorting the nature of these characters' experiences. Motherhood's pleasures and meanings remain largely mysterious, as reflected by the mysterious nature of the storylines in many of these books. In Shriver's novel, for example, the narrative impulse is to discover why Kevin murders his father, sister and fellow pupils. Similarly, in *Something*, there is a mystery concerning why Lennie, a happily married mother-of-two, gets her heart cut out in the village square. These questions remain unresolved in the novels. But the question that these texts do answer is why the experience of motherhood often feels bad, when nurturing a child should be about everything that is good.

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<sup>94</sup> David Parker, 'Introduction: The Turn to Ethics in the 1990s', in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory*, ed. by Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.1-17 (p.6).

## Chapter One –

### A Re-articulation of Motherhood

#### in Fiction and Memoir from 1995-2010

#### Questioning an Ideal

Motherhood today appears to present a very different proposition from that of our past, more traditional, sentimental understandings of it. The twenty-first-century mother can choose to continue with her career; she can become a single parent through divorce; she can elect to be a single parent from the outset, or choose to become a mother with the minimum biological input from a man. But whatever choices are made, becoming a mother inevitably means exposure to contentious issues and difficult decisions. Popular culture is alive with debate arising from these changes to the institution of motherhood: yet, significantly, the character of these discussions remains rooted in the past.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Forna comments on the apparent stasis in the debates on motherhood: 'thirty years on from the start of the second wave of the feminist movement, we are still debating the effects of day care on the children of working mothers and blaming never-married or divorced mothers for their children's problems' (Forna, p.3). She demonstrates her point by citing the BBC *Panorama* programme 'Missing Mum' (1997) which offered evidence to suggest that children fared badly when their mothers worked. This debate continued in 2009. An Independent Inquiry panel issued an 'evidence based' report entitled *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age*, now published as a book, see Richard Layard, *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2009). This empirical report had in part been commissioned to investigate the UNICEF claims of 2007 (made in *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries*) that found that young people in the UK were the unhappiest of any of the world's richest nations. The 2009 report concludes that children with a lone or a step-parent are 50% more likely to suffer problems with academic achievement, self-esteem, popularity with other children, behavioural difficulty, anxiety or depression. Absent fathers and working mothers are all listed as potentially damaging to young people's lives. *Child Poverty in Perspective: an Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries UNICEF* (February 2007) <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/13\\_02\\_07\\_nn\\_unicef.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/13_02_07_nn_unicef.pdf)> [accessed 27 April 2011]

Contemplation of motherhood inevitably revolves around what makes a *good* mother. In *Torn in Two*, Rozsika Parker contends that thinking about mothering demands 'our holding in mind many complex interactions of inner and external reality' (Parker, R., p.xiv): a negotiation between a particularised mother - be that ourselves, our own mother or mothers we have known - and the universal ideal mother, the mother we think we should be, or wish we had had, or have read about in literature. Our understanding of what makes a good mother engages with, what Kaplan calls, 'the archetypal patriarchal feminine inherited from nineteenth-century sentimentalism' (Kaplan, p.3). This ideal mother figure embodies features such as instantaneous and unconditional love, a natural ability to mother and a willingness to sacrifice herself for the good of the child. The myth of the ideal mother has such credibility because many believe with Doris Lessing that 'myth does not mean something untrue, but a concentration of truth'.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, this ideal remains significant to our current understanding of motherhood: for without exception, the fiction and memoir of the mother written during the years 1995 - 2010, included in this study, all engage to some extent with this mythic mother figure.

So whilst the study of *now* is the intended focus of this thesis, one finds oneself inexorably drawn back to a study of *then*. To this end, this chapter will compare and contrast influential fictions of the twentieth-century with twenty-first century novels and memoirs featuring motherhood. By exploring novels by D.H. Lawrence, Margaret Drabble,

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<sup>2</sup> Doris Lessing in interview for the BBC Radio 4 *Front Row* programme, 12 May 2008.

Doris Lessing and Fay Weldon this study will identify areas of change and of stasis in current depictions of motherhood, whilst exploring these changes in relation to the political and philosophical feminism of the twentieth-century that helped to inspire them. The chapter traces a line of progression in the nature of representations of motherhood, from sentimental portraits of motherhood's pleasures to more satirical depictions later in the twentieth-century, and thence to more recent portraits that attempt to establish ambivalence as a normal aspect of mothering.

### **Contemporary Writers in Search of the Mother**

It is, perhaps, the changing nature of motherhood that provoked the proliferation of motherhood fiction, memoir and childcare manuals at the turn of this century.<sup>3</sup> In a ground-breaking book on motherhood, *A Life's Work*, Cusk alludes to a seismic shift in our perceptions of motherhood, which she describes as 'an apocalypse, of unspecified cause but generally agreed to have been recent', in which

like the great library of Alexandria, a world of knowledge has gone up in flames. A chain of command has been broken [...] [and] [...] the point is that this is a new – in many ways a better – world. You are its first mother. And this is its first book. (*ALW*, p.112)

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<sup>3</sup> Naomi Wolf remarks upon the upsurge in interest in motherhood at the turn of this century: 'suddenly images of glamorous, effortless, chic, slim and affluent motherhood [are] surfacing everywhere'. Naomi Wolf, 'Maternal Myths', *The Times*, 24 March 2001, *Saturday magazine*, 14-16 (p.14).

Here, Cusk appears to be suggesting that contemporary mothers have become disconnected from previous representations or *meanings* ascribed to motherhood. She proposes that a line has been drawn under earlier experiences of motherhood, a consequence of which is that information on how to be a mother is now lost or has been rendered redundant:

in those days, the story goes, mothers were told what to do by *their* mothers [...] we will never know what these mothers whispered to their daughters, what secrets they handed down the years [...] my mother didn't tell me much about motherhood, it's true [...] she too seemed to have heard about the apocalypse. You all do it so differently now, she said. (ALW, p.112)

Cusk is not alone in her belief that 'a chain of command has been broken' (ALW, p.112). Other contemporaneous authors go further still, claiming that they have been prompted to write in response to what they perceive as a *dearth* of literature in the twentieth-century on the subject. Kate Figes maintains that she was inspired to write her childcare handbook *Life After Birth* (1998) by the belief that there are 'gaps left by existing literature [...] about the whirlwind of change inherent to new motherhood'.<sup>4</sup> Helen Simpson has similarly observed that in literature she had found 'various forms of truth about love and age and so forth but very little on the mystery of what happens to women after becoming

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<sup>4</sup> Kate Figes, *Life After Birth* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000), p.3.

mothers'.<sup>5</sup> And Cusk acknowledges her impression in 2001 that 'when I became a mother [...] nothing had been written about it at all' (*ALW*, p.4).

Although twentieth-century literature focuses more on sexual love than motherly love there is no lacuna in the novels of this period with regard to the mother, evidenced by many well-known fictional examples of motherhood and childbirth: D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow* (1915);<sup>6</sup> Penelope Mortimer's *The Pumpkin Eater* (1964);<sup>7</sup> Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965) and *The Waterfall* (1969);<sup>8</sup> French's *The Women's Room* (1977); Fay Weldon's *Puffball* (1980);<sup>9</sup> Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987);<sup>10</sup> Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988)<sup>11</sup> and Sylvia Plath's motherhood poetry, in particular 'Point Shirley' (1959), 'Metaphors' (1959) and 'Morning Song' (1961).<sup>12</sup> This body of twentieth-century literature has contributed to forming a cultural consciousness of what it means to be a mother.

Some non-fictional accounts have also helped to shape the latter half of the twentieth-century's attitudes toward the real-life mother, including Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949),<sup>13</sup> Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963),<sup>14</sup> Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*,

<sup>5</sup> Crewe, p.20.

<sup>6</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (1915); (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), hereafter *R*.

<sup>7</sup> Penelope Mortimer, *The Pumpkin Eater* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Drabble, *The Millstone* (1965); (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968), hereafter *M*, and Margaret Drabble, *The Waterfall* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969).

<sup>9</sup> Fay Weldon, *Puffball* (1980); (London: Coronet Books, 1981), hereafter *P*.

<sup>10</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child* (1988); (London: Grafton/Paladin, 1989), hereafter *FC*.

<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Plath, 'Point Shirley' (1959) in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p.110; 'Metaphors' (1959) in *Collected Poems* (1981), p.116; and 'Morning Song' (1961) in *Collected Poems* (1981), p.156.

<sup>13</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), trans. by H.M. Parshlay (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972).

<sup>14</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963); (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

and Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.

The texts of de Beauvoir, Friedan and Rich have become seminal works of the Women's Movement and continue to be cited in current research, polemics, historical analysis and social and cultural studies of motherhood.<sup>15</sup>

Although written in different historical periods, Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow* (1915) and Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965) offer portraits of childbirth and new motherhood that seemingly contradict the claim by current writers that motherhood has been under represented.

Furthermore, these novels are interesting because the depiction of the mother's reaction to her newborn remains remarkably similar in certain respects, despite being written 50 years apart and in contrasting periods of feminist thought. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* was written during first wave feminism and tells the story of three generations of the Brangwen family who farmed in the Midlands from about 1840 to 1900. In

*Feminisms: A Reader* (1992), Olive Schreiner defines first wave feminism as being concerned with rights such as suffrage.<sup>16</sup> The Representation of the People Act was passed in 1918 and granted the right to vote to women over thirty who owned houses. In 1928, this Act was extended to include all women over twenty-one. Kate Millett asserts in *Sexual Politics* (1977) that 'the feminist movement [was] at its height during the years of

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<sup>15</sup> I use the term Women's Movement here to be inclusive of the various movements that advocate equality for women and campaign for women's rights. In *A Life's Work*, Cusk acknowledges that she was inspired by Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience* 'to offer her own account' of motherhood in 2001 (ALW, p.4).

<sup>16</sup> Olive Schreiner, 'First Wave Feminism', in Humm, pp.11-14 (p.11).

*The Rainbow*, and a great force in Lawrence's time, one which he was compelled to deal with'.<sup>17</sup>

Drabble's *The Millstone* was written during feminism's second wave. Schreiner defines second wave feminism (1960s to 1980s) as largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as ending discrimination. Second wave feminism demonstrated that cultural and political inequalities are inextricably linked. Women were, therefore, encouraged to understand aspects of their personal life as politicised and reflecting sexist power structures. This notion was to be encapsulated by Carol Hanisch in 1970 with the now famous phrase, 'the personal is political' (Humm, p.xvii). Drabble's novel *The Millstone* is set in London during the 1960s and presents the story of a young, female academic who has a casual love affair resulting in an unplanned pregnancy. The title implies that a baby has the potential to become a *millstone* to its mother in a society that does not uphold equal rights.

It is curious, therefore, that despite being written in different historical periods, and featuring mothers with radically dissimilar social and educational backgrounds, both novels depict a mother's sense of rapture and instantaneous love for her newborn baby in similar terms. In a hyperbolic tone typical of Lawrence's style, he describes the novice mother Anna breastfeeding her baby for the first time: 'the milk came, and the infant sucked her breast, [Anna] seemed to be leaping with

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<sup>17</sup> Millett chastises Lawrence for finding emancipated women, such as Ursula (Anna's daughter in *The Rainbow*) a threat: 'big women are dangerous items unless they be the maternal figures of the past, and so the fate reserved for Ursula is a very different one – Lawrence causes her to fail her examinations, go down in defeat without her coveted B.A. and end her life a contented housewife'. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1977); (London: Virago, 2010), p.262.



extravagant bliss. "It sucks me, it sucks me, it likes me – oh, it loves it!" she cried, holding the child to her breast with her two hands covering it, passionately' (*R*, p.234).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Drabble depicts Rosamund's enjoyment in her child beginning from the moment she holds her baby for the first time, despite the difficulties involved with being a single mother during the 1960s. As soon as the nurse puts her baby in her arms, 'I sat there looking at her, and her great wide blue eyes looked at me with seeming recognition, and what I felt it is pointless to try to describe. Love, I suppose one might call it, and the first of my life' (*M*, p.102).

Doris Lessing's novel *The Fifth Child* (1988) begins in the 1960s and follows the Lovatt family through to the late 1980s. *The Fifth Child* is an examination of Harriet and David's desire for a large family. Children, they believe, will help to create 'a wonderful home life' that is, the author maintains, 'many people's fantasy'.<sup>19</sup> Their pursuit of the family idyll is set against a background of social upheaval, rising divorce rates and civil unrest. This novel occupies a different era to that of Lawrence's *The Rainbow* or Drabble's *The Millstone*, but, yet again, the depiction of

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<sup>18</sup> Millett understands *The Rainbow* to be celebrating 'pastoral life in terms of fertility [...] the power of the womb. Every event, whether it be falling in love or attaining maturity, is described in terms of fertility, gestation, parturition, and birth. In *The Rainbow*, women appear to give birth by parthenogenesis' (Millett, p.257). She is scathing about Lawrence's depiction of female experience, regarding his male perspective as both idealistic and voyeuristic. In *The Millstone*, Rosamund is also sceptical of male attitudes to pregnancy. Whilst waiting with other pregnant women in the doctor's surgery, Rosamund reflects, 'one hears much, though mostly from the interested male, about the beauty of a woman with child, ships in full sail, and all that kind of metaphorical euphemism [...] but the weight of evidence is overwhelmingly on the other side. Anaemia and exhaustion were written on most countenances: the clothes were dreadful, the legs swollen, the bodies heavy and unbalanced' (*M*, p.57).

<sup>19</sup> Mervyn Rothstein, 'The Painful Nurturing of Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*', *New York Times*, 14 June 1988, <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)> [accessed 12 October 2010] (para.12 of 13). Weldon also comments on the seductive nature of the family idyll in *Puffball*, with Liffey drawn to purchase an impractical house in the country because she assumes that at 'Honeycomb Cottage, generations of happy, healthy children, she thought, had skipped in and out of that door, along the path, under roses and between hollyhocks' (*P*, p.11).

mother-child bonding remains curiously consistent. Lessing depicts Harriet's reaction to her first four children as immediate and joyous. The births all take place at home, with the couple's bedroom providing an inclusive and loving environment for delivery. Here, Lessing describes the birth of Luke, the couple's first-born son:

it was a windy cold night, just after Christmas. The room was warm and wonderful. David wept. Dorothy [Harriet's mother] wept. Harriet laughed and wept. The midwife and the doctor had a little air of festivity and triumph. They all drank champagne, and poured some on little Luke's head. It was 1966. Luke was an easy baby. He slept most peaceably in the little room off the big bedroom, and was contentedly breastfed. Happiness! (*FC*, p.63)

These novels are not, by any means, isolated examples of how women experience initial, instinctive pleasure at mothering. It therefore appears that notions of a dearth of descriptions of the transition to motherhood are more to do with perception than fact. If it is accepted that motherhood has not been poorly represented but is currently poorly *perceived*, this raises questions about the nature of the representation of motherhood's pleasures. It is arguable that it is not, as the authors writing at the turn of the twenty-first century quoted here suggest, because motherhood has been previously poorly represented by literature, rather that the nature of some of these portraits now fail to convince a particular section of the present-day audience.

### Questioning Love at First Sight

Some of the meanings previously ascribed to motherhood no longer appear to have credibility. As we have seen, although the scenes of the initial meeting between mother and child in Lawrence, Drabble and Lessing belong to different historical periods (and depict highly particularised portraits of Anna, Rosamund and Harriet), these moments are strikingly similar. Their depictions represent the transition to motherhood as natural, joyous, easy, instantaneous and euphoric; the mothers experience immediate, unconditional love for their offspring. Scenes such as these have become a dominant, almost universal representation of love between mother and baby. Rozsika Parker remarks on the endurance of this expectation of birth in *Torn in Two*. Commenting from a psychological perspective, she observes that 'embedded deeply in our culture' is the belief that 'immediately after giving birth, most women expect to experience a joyful sense of love and oneness with their baby [...] it is a belief system that outlaws ambivalence, rendering it a source of shameful guilt' (Parker, R., p.43). This chapter identifies an emerging challenge to the dominant depiction of the notion of love at first sight in literature, beginning in the 1980s. The discussion follows a shift in dominance through to the millennium, rather than assert an absolute shift in perception.

This is not to say that writers in the past have not explored motherhood in terms of it's being a traumatic period in a woman's life. Fiction and poetry have always provided a comparatively safe haven for authors to write against the grain, to resist the existing discourses that

present motherhood as a fulfilling and rewarding experience for women.<sup>20</sup>

An example is Lawrence's portrayal of Mrs Morel in *Sons and Lovers* (1913) as feeling 'wretched with the coming child. The world seemed a dreary place, where nothing else would happen for her – at least until William grew up' (SL, p.12). However, certain moments in the mother-child relationship have remained sacrosanct. After giving birth, Mrs Morel 'looked at the child. It had blue eyes and a lot of fair hair and was bonny. Her love came up hot, in spite of everything. She had it in bed with her' (SL, p.30).

Lessing's *The Fifth Child* is set in the 'greedy and selfish sixties' (FC, p.29) and documents the beginnings of challenge to the traditional family: David's father, James, articulates these doubts: 'people are brainwashed into believing family life is best. But that's in the past' (FC, p.36). With the birth of Harriet's fifth child, Ben, it becomes apparent that Lessing's novel is satirising the notion of the ideal motherhood and idyllic family life: for Harriet's fifth child is 'a *monster*' (FC, p.58). His birth reveals Harriet's much lauded maternal nature, her apparently boundless mother-love, to be conditional after all. Lessing, therefore, uses the sentimental portraits of Harriet's first four births and babies to expose Harriet's unrealistic and selfish 'demand on life' (FC, p.47), to undercut the culturally dominant representation of love at first sight and instinctive mother-love. Harriet *would* have fallen in love with Ben had he conformed to her ideal notion of a child, had he been like her other

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<sup>20</sup> Plath's motherhood poetry runs counter to the widely recognised perspective of motherhood, depicting the experience as one defined by loss: loss of beauty, of free time, and of identity. Although Plath offers a negative portrayal of motherhood, it also remains a loving portrait, particularly her poem 'Point Shirley'.

babies, like Paul, for example, 'she loved the look of him, the comical soft little face, with soft blue eyes – like bluebells, she thought – and his soft little limbs' (*FC*, p.62). By contrast, Ben

did not look like a baby at all. He had a heavy shouldered hunched look, like he was crouching where he lay. His forehead sloped from his eyes to his crown. His hair grew in an unusual pattern from the double crown where started a wedge or triangle that came low on the forehead, the hair lying forward in a thick yellowish stubble [...] he opened his eyes and looked straight up into his mother's face. They were focused greeny-yellow eyes, like lumps of soapstone. She had been waiting to exchange looks with the creature who, she had been sure, had been trying to hurt her, but there was no recognition there. And her heart contracted with pity for him: poor little beast, his mother disliking him so much. (*FC*, p.60)

Even in the womb, Harriet experiences Ben as a 'savage thing inside her' (*FC*, p.51) that attempts to 'tear its way out of her stomach' (*FC*, p.49). His first attempt at breastfeeding is described in shocking terms, with the newborn roaring

with rage, fastened like a leech to the other nipple, and suck[ing] so hard she felt that her whole breast was disappearing down his throat. This time, she left him on the nipple until he ground his gums hard together and she cried out, pulling him away. (*FC*, p.63)

Even this ideologically-resistant depiction of motherhood, however, represents a lack of *love at first sight* to be the result of an *unnatural* mother or an *unnatural* child. Ben is described as an 'angry, hostile little troll' (FC, p.69), depicted as existing outside of our range of normality. When interviewed in the *New York Times*, Lessing describes him as 'an alien creature';<sup>21</sup> she uses birth and motherhood, specifically, to make a point about the horror of the Other.<sup>22</sup> In his early infancy Ben becomes a dog-killer, attempts fratricide and his mother suspects him of rape when he is a young teenager. He is an exaggerated figure of horror 'in whom the human template had been wrenched out of pattern' (FC, p.98). Indeed, *The Fifth Child* can be regarded as reflecting a many fronted, multi-dimensional attack on the normalcy of birth and motherhood, beginning in the late 1960s.<sup>23</sup> A trend emerged within the horror genre that depicted pregnancy as a form of alien, parasitical infestation or demonic possession. Well-known cinematic examples include *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Omen* (1976).<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein, Fay

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<sup>21</sup> Rothstein (para. 4 of 13).

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault (1926-84) posits the notion of the Other. He defines the Other as sitting outside of the conformity of the Same/Different range of behaviours/physical attributes and is therefore inscribed within the discourses of madness, sickness, criminality and sexuality and must be 'shut away', either literally or figuratively. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité*, Vol. 1, *La Volonté de Savoir* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976), p.xxiv.

<sup>23</sup> It has been noted that there is a longer tradition of depicting birth as monstrous, for example, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1589).

<sup>24</sup> *Rosemary's Baby*. Dir. Polanski. Paramount Pictures. 1968. *The Omen*. Dir. Bonner. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. 1976. Other films that focus on pregnancy as a form of alien, parasitical infestation or demonic possession include *It's Alive*. Dir. Cohen. Warner Bros. Pictures. 1974; *The Brood*. Dir. Cronenberg. New World-Mutual. 1979; and most recently *The Astronaut's Wife*. Dir. Ravich. New Line Cinema. 1999. Mrs Armitage in Mortimer's novel *The Pumpkin Eater*, refers to her children as having 'eyes as restless as maggots' (p.101): emphasising the parasitical nature of a child's dependency on its mother. Eva in Shriver's *Kevin* observes 'ever noticed how many films portray pregnancy as infestation, as colonisation by stealth? *Rosemary's Baby* was just the beginning. In *Alien*, a foul extraterrestrial claws its way out of John Hurt's belly. In *Mimic*, a woman gives birth to a two-foot maggot' (K, p.58).

Weldon's novel *Puffball* flirts with the idea of witchcraft in the tale of a young woman's first pregnancy. Weldon's choice of title takes its name from a parasitical fungus, a puffball being a type of toadstool, 'the smooth round swelling [of which] made Liffey think of a belly swollen by pregnancy' (*P*, p.19). Whilst pregnant, Liffey ponders the parasitical nature of a baby's dependency on its mother: 'a child may very well seem unreal to the mother. Something dreamed up, clothed in flesh and blood, which sucked and gnawed and depleted' (*P*, p.99).

These books and films can be seen as a cultural manifestation of feminist thought of that period, which sought to popularise the detrimental effects of pregnancy and childbirth on women's lives. Germaine Greer argues that 'with motherhood, women willingly endure a catastrophic decline in their quality of life'.<sup>25</sup> In the main, however, although negative representations of pregnancy as a malevolent rival life force mark a progression away from idealised depictions of birth, this challenge was largely confined to the horror genre. Weldon's novel is more realistic than the films cited here and only toys with ideas of the supernatural. When Liffey's baby is born, Weldon returns to a more sentimental (although decidedly tongue-in-cheek) representation of the mother-child relationship: 'Liffey's good fortune returned. Or perhaps it was merely that now she carried the baby in her arms, the ordinary up-and-downness of life returned' (*P*, p.269).

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<sup>25</sup> I have been unable to trace the original reference for Greer's assertion, as this information is not provided in the source material. This quotation is taken from Nikki Gemmell, 'Tales of the Recent Past', *GA*, pp.214-24, (p.215).

By contrast with *Puffball*, Lessing acknowledges that *The Fifth Child* 'is a classic horror story'.<sup>26</sup> Harriet's emotional rejection of Ben, therefore, becomes acceptable within the convention of the horror genre, (being similar to the feelings of rejection engendered by the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* [1818]). In other words, a consequence of the revulsion Ben provokes is that it legitimises Harriet's failure to love him: 'it was not with love, or even affection, that she thought of him, and she disliked herself for not being able to find one little spark of normal feeling: it was guilt and horror that kept her awake through the night' (*FC*, p.94). Perhaps one reason for the extreme nature of Ben's depiction could be that Lessing wanted to ensure her readers' complicity in Harriet's rejection of him, so that we, too, share Harriet's feelings of guilt and self-loathing at rejecting a baby at birth. We recoil, as the doctor whom Harriet consults, recoils: 'she saw on the doctor's face what she expected to see: a dark fixed stare that reflected what the doctor was feeling, which was horror at the alien, rejection by the normal. Horror of Harriet, who had given birth to Ben' (*FC*, p.128). On a more realistic level, Lessing's novel explores our fear of difference, deformity and handicap, and includes a Down's Syndrome child in the story, Harriet's sister's daughter, Amy. On the birth of this child, prejudices are revealed, with Harriet reflecting that it was her sister's and brother-in-law's constant arguing that had 'probably attracted the mongol child – yes, yes, of course she knew one shouldn't call them mongol. But the little girl did

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<sup>26</sup> Rothstein (para. 4 of 13).



look a bit like Genghis Khan, didn't she? A baby Genghis Khan with her squashed little face and her slitty eyes' (*FC*, p.29).

For the most part, however, Lessing examines the concept of what is normal and natural through the character of Ben. Prior to the birth of Ben, Harriet and David placed great reliance on the fact that nature was a benevolent force, that it was 'at some level or other to be relied upon' (*FC*, p.111). Her novel also prompts the reader to consider to what degree a mother's love is unconditional, if that love is predicated upon giving birth to an idealised notion of a baby. Popular expectation is that mothers will love their infants, whatever that child may be like. It is the doctor who enforces this expectation in the text, rebuking Harriet when she expresses her antipathy of Ben: "we can't choose what will turn up in the Lottery – and that is what having a baby is" (*FC*, p. 125).<sup>27</sup> Lessing is satirising dominant representations of idealised mothers and idealised children, and the cultural expectations that these depictions re-inforce. However, because Ben is an horrific figure, Lessing situates her discussion of what is normal *outside* of a normal context. Ben is not an ordinary, less-than-perfect child.

Crucially, writers working at the turn of this century appear to want to go further than Lessing and establish the notion of a mother's lack of spontaneous love, her ambivalence, or even dislike of her newborn, as not abnormal but *natural*. Figes argues that

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<sup>27</sup> Lessing herself has an adult child with learning disabilities and has stated in interview that she does not consider herself to be a *natural* mother. She provides the following explanation for leaving her children from her first marriage behind her in Zimbabwe: 'I wasn't the best person to bring them up. I would have ended up an alcoholic or a frustrated intellectual like my mother'. Dwight Garner, 'A Notorious Life. The Salon Interview: Doris Lessing' (1997) <[www.salon.com/books/feature/1997](http://www.salon.com/books/feature/1997)> [accessed 12 October 2010]

it is easy to assume that women switch instinctively to mothering. In actual fact the majority of new mothers experience difficulties with breastfeeding, feel indifferent relief rather than 'mother love' when they first set eyes on their progeny and then spend months adjusting to their new responsibilities. (Figes, p.viii)

In *A Life's Work*, Cusk offers readers 'a personal record of transition', following the birth of her first child (p.2). As a memoir, Cusk offer a *realistic* insight into motherhood. She forces herself to recall this period of her life, one that she found so difficult she had almost 'wilfully forgot [because] I couldn't bear, in fact, to feel it' (*ALW*, p.2). As part of her attempt to understand her reaction to motherhood she revisits the work of the eccentric paediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott.<sup>28</sup> Winnicott (1896-1971) controversially claimed that all mothers hate their babies 'from the word go'. Cusk, however, qualifies this statement: 'he didn't mean that they didn't love them; just that they hated them too' (*ALW*, p.77). Rozsika Parker's book *Torn in Two* focuses on the concept of maternal ambivalence, and observes that

possibly it is the unacceptability of the element of hatred – that has led to the widespread misuse of the term 'ambivalence'.

It is often employed to describe *mixed* feelings rather than the concept developed by psychoanalysis according to which quite contradictory impulses and emotions toward the same person

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<sup>28</sup> Winnicott argued that the *ideal* mother is in part a projection of the mother's feeling of hatred for her newborn. On the basis of his work, Cusk interprets the mother's willingness to sacrifice herself as part of a process where she attempts to 'sterilise away her ambivalence, her feelings of violence and displacement, keeping her urges to abandonment in tiny, vacuum-sealed jars' (*ALW*, p.77).

co-exist. (Parker, R., p.7)

Fictional descriptions of modern-day, hale and hearty newborns offer few examples to inspire instantaneous love. Babies are no longer depicted as the loveable, animated dolls of the past, such as Mrs Morel's newborn in *Sons and Lovers*: 'it had blue eyes and a lot of fair hair and was bonny' (SL, p.30). In Jill Dawson's 'The Twilight Zone' (2001) the baby 'stiffen[s] each time [she] offer[s] him [her] breast'.<sup>29</sup> The baby's face is, 'red and angry, hungry, demented', whilst Cusk's daughter is 'livid and blue [...] her face is a rictus of shock and fear' (ALW, p.42). When new mother Eva offers her baby her breast in Shriver's novel, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, the baby 'loll[s] away in distaste' (K, p.81). When Ruth tries to hold her newborn baby in Gregory's *The Little House*, she is traumatised by the violence of his response:

it was incredible that a baby so small could make so much noise, and that noise should be so unbearably penetrating. Ruth could feel her own tension rising as the baby's cries grew louder and more and more desperate. 'Oh, please!' she cried out. 'Please don't cry like that. Someone will come soon! Someone will come soon!' (LH, p.75)

In varying degrees, these recent fictional accounts and memoirs offer an insight into maternal ambivalence. When Ruth attempts to breastfeed her son, she experiences only rejection and an agonising sense of failure:

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<sup>29</sup> Jill Dawson, 'The Twilight Zone', GA, pp.87-104 (p.88).

he would not suck. Four, five times, they repeated the procedure. He would not latch on the nipple. Ruth felt herself blushing scarlet with embarrassment and felt ridiculous easy tears coming again. 'He doesn't want to', she said. She felt her breasts were disgusting, that the baby was making a wise choice in his rejection. (*LH*, p.73)

Such depictions of mother-child bonding are in stark contrast to Anna's joyous first attempt at breastfeeding in *The Rainbow* or Harriet's first four idyllic home births in *The Fifth Child*.

Indeed, the latest descriptions of newborns are more reminiscent of Harriet's fifth child, Ben: 'the baby was put into her arms. Eleven pounds of him. The others had not been more than seven pounds. He was muscular, yellowish, long. It seemed as if he were trying to stand up, pushing his feet into her side' (*FC*, p.60). Whereas Lessing describes Ben as a 'freak' baby, these authors writing post millennium are depicting normal, healthy offspring in similarly unappealing terms. Unlike the angelic beauty of Octavia in *The Millstone*, the baby in Polly Samson's 'Love at First Sight' (2001) is 'a shocker: astonishingly long, with the muscular back of an athlete'.<sup>30</sup> When the mother eventually looks into her baby's eye, 'it was a bright black marble, unblinking and so penetrating that it was like staring at the sun and [she] had to look away' (*GA*, p.30). The new mother in Dawson's 'The Twilight Zone' is compelled to ask the midwife to 'take this baby away, please. He doesn't like me and I can tell he wants to go back' (*GA*, p.89). In *Kevin*, Eva

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<sup>30</sup> Polly Samson, 'Love at First Sight', *GA*, pp.26-35 (p.29).

confesses that 'at being relieved of him, [her] gratitude was soul destroying' (*K*, p.83).

This change in the nature of the depiction of a mother's initial reaction to her baby is well illustrated in Samson's 'Love at First Sight', focusing as it does on motherhood's natural responses and pleasures. In this short story, Samson's mother-to-be has been assured that upon giving birth 'it will be love at first sight. That's what they tell you. They tell you about deep eye contact. It will be impossible to look away, they say' (*GA*, p.28). But, when the long-awaited moment arrives, the midwife 'was prompting [her] to take [her] baby into [her] arms, to have a look, but [she] was too shocked; in fact, [she] had started to shake all over and [she] thought [she] might be about to cry' (*GA*, p.29). Controversially, Shriver describes Eva's reaction to the birth of her son in *Kevin* as even more disappointing:

here [they] were, in a room, and there seemed nothing to do or say. Minutes wore on, Kevin would yowl, rest limply, and jerk irritably from time to time; [Eva] felt the first stirrings of what, appallingly, [she] can only call boredom. (*K*, p.46)

Rozsika Parker observes that 'love is, of course, an easier affect to acknowledge than hate; it is taken for granted in mothers. Love's absence is acknowledged to be a disaster' (Parker, R., p.6). Parker's observation is a self-fulfilling prophesy in the case of *Kevin*: Kevin grows up to murder his father, sister and thirteen of his classmates, in an effort to secure unconditional love from his mother, Eva.

These post-millennium stories contribute to a larger debate, one that suggests motherhood is a learned, as opposed to a natural response. The mother in 'The Twilight Zone' 'can't think of [herself] as mum yet, after only ... (a glance at the clock above [the nurse's] desk tells [her] it's midnight) eight hours and three minutes' (GA, p.87). She needs time to build a relationship with her baby. Similarly, Shriver's Eva imagines her husband's comforting words on her lack of emotion at Kevin's birth:

parenthood isn't something that happens in an instant. The fact of a baby – when so recently there was none – is so disconcerting that [she] probably just hadn't made the whole thing real to [herself] yet. [She] was dazed. That's it, [she] was dazed. [She] wasn't heartless and defective. (K, p.83)

These authors are thus challenging, or at least re-examining, pre-existent *essentialist* understandings of mother-child bonding. Fuss, in 'The "Risk" of Essence', provides what she describes as a 'classically defined' description of essentialism: 'a belief in true essence – that which is most irreducible, unchanging and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing' (Fuss, p.251). These writers are disputing the notion that it is a true essence of womanhood that on becoming a mother a woman will love her baby instantly and unconditionally. The "risk" of essence has attracted much critical attention over the last half century. This work has been dedicated to exposing the inherent dangers in describing a type of person, gender or race by a set of universal, essential characteristics: to think in Fuss's terms of 'essential femininity, essential blackness,

essential gayness'.<sup>31</sup> Essentialism as a concept can be at best prescriptive or at worst discriminatory to the person or thing it describes.

### **Questioning Perceptions of Male and Female Difference**

Fay Weldon's novel *Puffball* satirised essentialist perceptions of femininity as long ago as 1980. The novel parodies cultural assumptions that the female purpose is to reproduce. Despite Liffey's valuing 'her freedom and her figure' and having no intention of becoming pregnant, the novel's structure is organised around Liffey's menstrual cycle, with chapters entitled 'Full Moon' and 'Inside Liffey - one to four', documenting ovulation, fertilisation and culminating in 'Birth' (*P*, p.15). Weldon informs the reader that 'there was an outer Liffey, arrived at twenty-eight with boyish body and tiny breasts [...] and there was the inner cosmic Liffey, hormones buzzing; heart beating, blood surging, pawn in nature's game' (*P*, p.13). Instinctively, Liffey

put on scent, thrust out her chest, silhouetted her buttocks and drew male eyes to her. That way satisfaction lay: the easing of a blind and restless procreative spirit. How could she help herself? Why should she? It was her role in the mating dance, and Liffey danced on. (*P*, p.13)

Weldon depicts Liffey as not being in control of her destiny: her femininity will dictate what will happen to her. Weldon sends-up this view, wryly

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<sup>31</sup> Millett comments that in Lawrence's depiction of Constance in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1960), he 'never uses the word female in the novel without prefacing it with the adjectives "weird" or "queer": this is presumably done to persuade the reader that woman is a dim prehistoric creature operating on primeval impulse' (Millett, p.243).

observing that 'it is not pleasant for a young woman to believe that her behaviour is dictated by her chemistry' (*P*, p.15).

The novel's humour and drama arises from essentialist beliefs about male and female difference, which are caricatured in the novel. As a female, Liffey is depicted as being closely connected with the earth and nature. Here, Weldon is lampooning a point of view which reveres female 'fecundity, serenity, their magical correspondence to the earth and moon'.<sup>32</sup> Liffey worries

about the world's natural resources [...] being eaten up [whereas] Richard [her husband] knew that new developments in nuclear, chemical and silicon chip technology would soon solve all problems, laughed gently and comfortingly at her worries and loved her for worrying. (*P*, p.8)

Because he is male, Richard perceives himself to be rational, whereas Liffey, with her 'hormones buzzing' is more emotional and needs his protection.<sup>33</sup> Liffey desires a house in the country, to escape from 'an artificiality of life' (*P*, p.11), whereas Richard wants to remain in the town because 'he was realistic where Liffey was romantic' (*P*, p.12).

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<sup>32</sup> Millett makes this observation of Lawrence whilst commenting on *The Rainbow* (Millett, p.260).

<sup>33</sup> Millett observes a similar division of attributes in *Sons and Lovers*. She asserts that 'it is Paul's habit to lecture his mistresses that, as women, they are incapable of the sort of wholehearted attention to task or achievement that is the province of the male and the cause of his superiority: "I suppose work can be everything to a man [...] But a woman only works with part of herself. The real and vital parts are covered up" (*SL*, p.416). The idea seems to be that the female's lower nature, here gently phrased as her "true nature" is incapable of objective activity and finds its only satisfactions in human relationships where she may be of service to men and to children' (Millett, p.256). Weldon satirises these gender stereotypes through Liffey and Richard's relationship in *Puffball*. Liffey protests to Richard that while he has a career and fulfilment, "what do I have?" (*P*, p.10).



Weldon's characterisation of Liffey reflects attitudes deeply ingrained in the fictional representations of women. These attitudes assume that women are the victims of their own biology: over-emotional, irrational, governed by instinct and biologically programmed to love children. Regardless of Liffey's initial resistance to becoming a mother, Weldon constructs a plot in which Liffey's biology conspires against her, until she fulfils her natural purpose as a woman and becomes pregnant. Despite Liffey not wanting a child and her husband abandoning her alone in the country late in her pregnancy (and narrowly surviving the murderous attentions of her neighbour, Mabs), Liffey immediately accepts her baby following a particularly bloody emergency caesarean. Her *natural mothering instinct* is aroused the moment

the baby lay in Liffey's arms snuffling and rooting for food. She sensed its triumph. None of that was important, the baby reproved her: they were peripheral events, leading toward the main end of your life, which was to produce me' (*P*, p 264).

Weldon's novel makes fun of essentialist notions of the female instinct to reproduce and to nurture. However, her challenge is presented in the form of a gentle satire (not a realistic rebuttal) and the supernatural elements of *Puffball* inhibit a direct application of her message to real life.

The idea that gender denotes a natural difference between men and women found partial support in the work of some of the more radical feminists. Rich argues in *Of Woman Born* for the recognition of difference in how women respond to the external world:

we know that the sight of a certain face, the sound of a voice, can stir waves of tenderness in the uterus. From brain to clitoris through vagina to uterus, from tongue to nipples to clitoris, from fingertips to nipples to brain, from nipples to brain and into the uterus, we are strung with invisible messages of an urgency and restlessness which indeed cannot be appeased, and of a cognitive potentiality that we are only beginning to guess at. (Rich, p.289)

Here, Rich concludes with the suggestion that this uniquely female erogenous perception privileges women over men: women's bodies add another dimension allowing for a deeper understanding of their environment. Fuss maintains that in feminist theory, essentialism 'articulates itself in a variety of ways' (Fuss, p.250). For some feminists, essentialism is an empowering concept, describing 'a pure or original femininity, a female essence, outside the boundaries of the social and thereby untainted (though perhaps repressed) by a patriarchal order' (Fuss, p.250).

In her essay 'Uses of the Erotic' (1978), Audre Lorde appropriates the erotic to the feminine, locating it within 'a deeply female and spiritual plane', and elevates it as a 'profoundly creative source', if only it can resist repression by 'racist, patriarchal and anti-erotic society'.<sup>34</sup> Lorde broadens the definition of the erotic to include a spiritual dimension and in so doing asserts an exclusively female experience that describes

an arena of sensual experiences intense enough to evoke

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<sup>34</sup> Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power' in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, California: The Crossing Press, 1984), pp.53-9.

deeply physical, emotional, and self-expressive feelings all at the same time [...] at least momentarily, the erotic blends intense experiences of transcendence and embodiment. (Lorde, p.59)

For these feminists, female physical differences equate to a unique, though frequently unexploited, source of power. Weldon satirises this idea through the character of Mabs in *Puffball*, attributing to her a supernatural energy. Her power is intimately connected to her ability to reproduce: 'Mabs liked to be pregnant [...] a channel for forces greater than herself' (*P*, p.28). She has 'an erotic strength' (*P*, p.97), 'all hooked up to the hot lines of the Universe' (*P*, p.107). Mabs is portrayed as intimately connected to the natural world; she is able to affect thunder and lightning over the Tor and can choose when she 'lets the moon go' from her field of influence (*P*, p.86). Mabs descends from a long line of witches, an ancient family by the name of Tree (Weldon consistently draws on the connection between femininity and nature): "'It's not magic" [her] mother would say, limping, as she mixed her powders and potions, "it's medicine. Natural, herbal medicine"' (*P*, p.75). In Weldon's satirical fiction, however, pregnancy imbues all females with power, irrespective of whether or not they have a supernatural heritage. After Liffey conceives, she becomes an equal match for Mabs, despite Mabs regarding her as 'a bubble of city froth' (*P*, p.42). With child, Liffey becomes imbued with 'powers' of her own:

that Mabs could no longer have Nature all her own way; that forces worked for Liffey too, and not just Mabs. Winter winds were on Mabs' side, and frost, and lightning and storms. Liffey

loved sun, and breeze, and warmth; and they loved her. And spring was coming. (*P*, p.142)

The apparent endorsement of essentialist ideology by Luce Irigaray, for example, can be understood as partly a response to early psychoanalytic theory which, according to Elizabeth Grosz, can 'be read as a symptom of a broader, underlying cultural and intellectual misogyny'.<sup>35</sup> Grosz claims that Irigaray's work is 'scathing about Freud's views on the oedipal structure as an asymmetrical regulative principle of sexual organisation' (Grosz, p.103).<sup>36</sup> Irigaray (herself trained in Lacanian psychoanalysis) refutes any presumption that finds 'the feminine [...] defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject' (Grosz, p.103).<sup>37</sup> She explores the problematic representation of the female in psychoanalysis in 'This Sex Which Is Not One' (1977), and focuses on the mother's position in the symbolic realm in 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other' (1981).<sup>38</sup> Essentialists used Irigaray's work to support notions of women's *sexual specificity*, asserting that 'physical differences alone (birthing, lactation,

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), p.105.

<sup>36</sup> Psychoanalytic theory and its influence on contemporary fictional representations of motherhood will be discussed in chapter three.

<sup>37</sup> Kaplan also contends that early psychoanalysis was not concerned with explicating feminine subjectivity. 'In Freudian individuation theory, for example, the mother is perceived only from the point of view of the child, and then only in terms of whether or not she is in possession of a phallus. By implication, by privileging the phallus as mediator of the symbolic level, women are deprived of a "voice" even within the sub-conscious. Although Lacan was to describe what he called "jouissance" as "a specifically feminine, bodily, kind of ecstasy" he too situated this facility as that which "lies beyond the phallus, and is for that reason not able to be spoken within discourse" (Kaplan, p.31).

<sup>38</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which Is Not One' in *Language, Sexuality and Subversion*, ed. by F. Foss and M. Morris (Sydney: Feral, 1978). See also Luce Irigaray, 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other', *Signs* 7, (1981), 60-7.

menstruation) make women more connected with matter or with the physical world than men'.<sup>39</sup>

Fuss describes an alternative interpretation of attributing uniquely female characteristics to women. For social constructionists, Fuss observes, essentialism can 'be read in the accounts of universal female oppression, the assumption of a totalising symbolic system which subjugates all women everywhere, throughout history and across cultures' (Fuss, p.251). Again, this observation is humorously demonstrated in Weldon's *Puffball*. The following conversation takes place between Mabs and her husband Tucker whilst they are spying on their new countryside neighbours, Liffey and Richard, who have chosen unwisely (believing themselves to be unobserved) to make love in the open: "she's just a farmyard animal like any other", Tucker says of Liffey, to which Mabs responds angrily, "Women aren't animals". "Yes they are", said Tucker, "tamed for the convenience of men" (*P*, p.10). Later in the story, Liffey ponders on this thought further: 'surely human beings are more than farmyard animals? Don't we have poetry, and paintings, and great civilisations and history? Or is it only men who have these things? Not women. She felt, for the first time in her life, at the mercy of her body' (*P*, p.48). As well as empowering women, the "risk" of essentialism is that it can also be used as a reductive ideology.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p.529.

<sup>40</sup> The cultural eagerness to attribute emotional characteristics that are regarded as reductive to the feminine forms part of de Beauvoir's thesis of 'Woman as Other'. See Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Fictional examples include Harriet in *The Fifth Child*. She suffers this type of discrimination when she asks her doctor to induce her baby at eight months: "would you say I was an unreasonable woman? Hysterical? Difficult? Just a pathetic hysterical woman?" (*FC*, p.59). Also the mother in

In 'Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminine Epistemology', Alison Jaggar takes the social constructionist argument one stage further, by objecting to what she considers to be a patriarchal convention that has trivialised emotional response. She asserts that 'within the Western philosophical tradition emotions have usually been considered potentially or actually subversive of knowledge'.<sup>41</sup> She defends the value of emotion and argues against a 'western tradition [that] has been profoundly rationalist, and much of its history may be viewed as a continuous redrawing of the boundaries of the rational' (Jaggar, p.189). She concurs with the feminist proposition that 'reason [has been] associated with the male [and that] emotion has been associated with the irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private and of course, the female' (Jaggar, p.188). However, Jaggar does not perceive emotion as negative.<sup>42</sup>

Gregory's fiction *The Little House* (1998) suggests that the perception of the female as more emotional than the male remains prevalent, particularly in relation to pro-creation. Patrick dismisses his wife Ruth's obvious misgivings concerning her pregnancy, attributing her lack of enthusiasm to her hormones: "you're bound to feel all jumbled up,

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Cleave's *Incendiary* presents a very rational argument that bomb disposal is an unsuitable job for a family man to undertake, but her husband silences her complaints about his profession with the all too familiar accusation of "you're turning into an hysterical woman" (I, p.33).

<sup>41</sup> Alison Jaggar, 'Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminine Epistemology', *Inquiry*, 32 (1989), 151-72, reprinted in *Feminisms*, ed., by Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.188-93, (p.188).

<sup>42</sup> Carol Gilligan maintains that there remain important differences between the sexes. Carol Gilligan and J. Attanucci, 'Two moral Orientations: Gender Differences and Similarities', *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 34 (1985), 223-37. Ann Oakley explores definitions of sex and gender and questions essentialist interpretations of anthropological studies. Ann Oakley, 'Feminism, Motherhood and Medicine: Who Cares?' in *What is Feminism?* ed. by J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

my darling. It's well known. It's your hormones. Of course you don't know what you feel yet. There! There!" (LH, p.46). When his mother questions him as to whether Ruth actually wants the baby she is expecting, Patrick outrageously assures her "she's happier than she knows" (LH, p.47). Patrick's wilful misinterpretation of his wife's reaction to her baby contributes to her later hospitalisation, following the birth of their child. Gregory is satirising Patrick's views, whilst illustrating how damaging and discriminatory such assumptions can be.

Both Gregory's and Weldon's novels explore the nature of femininity. Twenty years apart, the novels share many similarities. Ruth in *The Little House* experiences an almost parallel experience of pregnancy and childbirth to that of Liffey in *Puffball*. Ruth, like Liffey, is pressurised into motherhood by her husband. Once pregnant, she too is abandoned by him to a solitary life in the country, with only her malevolent mother-in-law for company. Ruth's neglect by her husband also contributes to her having to undergo an emergency caesarean, just like Liffey. Unlike Liffey, however, Ruth does not turn to her baby for solace after delivery. Ruth rejects her son, feeling alienated from her newborn: "Is it mine?" she asked baldly' (LH, p.71). The similarities between the two novels highlight the difference in the nature of the depiction of mother-child bonding. Weldon's satire does not countenance Liffey rejecting her newborn, whereas Gregory's fictional account of motherhood presents the reader with a portrait of maternal ambivalence that extends beyond delivery. Ruth does not accept her son until he is six

months old.<sup>43</sup> Part of the reason for her reaction to him as a newborn was that she felt that she needed the experience of labour, of actually giving birth, to help her to start the process of learning to love her son. Gregory depicts motherhood as a *learned* aspect of womanhood rather than an inherent feature of it. On Ruth's return from the clinic where she has received psychological counselling, she informs her husband that "I feel as if I have only just given birth to him now, as if all the days before were just part of a hard pregnancy. I'm ready to love him now" (*LH*, p.208). Ruth's counsellor confirms Ruth's progress toward building her relationship with her son, reassuring Ruth that "I think you should know that I believe that you are a very good mother," she said gently. "I think you are learning all the time how to care for Thomas, and that you are an excellent mother" (*LH*, p.324). In common with post-millennium fiction and memoir discussed earlier, *The Little House* attempts to establish that having to *learn* how to be a mother does not mean a woman is, as Eva fears in *Kevin*, 'heartless and defective' (*K*, p.83) – but it is, perhaps, normal.

### Questioning Portraits of Childbirth

Lawrence's depiction of Anna's labour in *The Rainbow* (1915) conforms wholly to the essentialist understanding of motherhood: that childbirth is a natural and pleasurable feature of womanhood. Anna's femininity relishes the physical hardships of giving birth: 'how proud she was, what

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<sup>43</sup> In *Puffball*, Weldon does include a mother who does not love her children, in the character of Mabs, who is depicted as abnormal and cruel, a *witch* who physically and emotionally abuses her children. In Weldon's fiction, therefore, a lack of love for children is depicted as most definitely heartless and defective.



a lovely proud thing her young body' (*R*, p.233). Childbirth, though painful, is portrayed as part of Anna's womanhood:

even the fierce tearing pain was exhilarating. She screamed and she suffered, but was all the time curiously alive and vital. She felt so powerfully alive and in the hands of such a masterly force of life, that her bottom-most feeling was one of exhilaration. (*R*, p.233)

Her husband, Lawrence audaciously informs us, 'probably [...] suffered more than she did' (*R*, p.234).

Millett's scathing feminist critique of *The Rainbow* in *Sexual Politics* asserts that Lawrence is suffering here from 'womb envy':

the idea of womb envy might strike one as pure invention, Karen Horney's malicious answer to Freud's penis envy. But in Lawrence, we seem to have hit upon an authentic case of this disorder. Accordingly, the early sections of *The Rainbow* show a curious absorption in the myth of the eternal feminine, the earth mother, and constitute a veritable hymn to the feminine mystique. (Millett, p.258)<sup>44</sup>

Millett's analysis parodies the eulogising, essentialist quality of Lawrence's depiction of Anna giving birth. There is little doubt that this is

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<sup>44</sup> Millett contends that Lawrence's lauding of Anna's unique female power also hides a more sinister, discriminatory attitude toward women: 'But when a creature [such as Anna] equipped with all this redoubtable mana enters into what he prefers here to imagine is the male's own lesser sphere of intellect and social action, he seems caught in a rush of terror [...] there is a current of bitter animosity which runs throughout Lawrence's description of Ursula's [Anna's daughter's] invasion of the "mysterious man's world", the world of "daily work and duty and existence as a working member of the community" for really, he keeps reminding the reader, it is neither natural nor necessary that she so transgress. After all, she is, in the vulgar expression, sitting on a fortune and is never without the price of her ransom – her femaleness' (Millett, p.260). Millett obviously feels Lawrence's idealisation of Anna's femininity conceals his fear of the female power to emasculate.

not a particularly convincing portrait of childbirth: there is no blood and no sense of physical compromise. Lawrence informs the reader that 'to her, her pains were the wound-smart of a victor, she was the prouder' (*R*, p.234). Anna is depicted as taking charge of her labour because it is part of her essential femininity; indeed, she appears to experience not so much a labour as a form of sensualised transcendence. There is something uncomfortable, almost voyeuristic, for the female reader seeing a woman thus constructed.

The author's gender apart, Lawrence's depiction is representative of a type of fictional portrayal of childbirth that still influences cultural thinking about motherhood. Gregory scrutinises the endurance of essentialist notions about birth in *The Little House*. Ruth's husband Patrick is irritated by his wife's demands to attend antenatal classes as 'everyone knew [...] that having a baby was as natural as shelling peas, that there was nothing to worry about' (*LH*, p.67).<sup>45</sup>

Drabble also portrays certain aspects of childbirth in *The Millstone* in similar terms to those of Lawrence. Childbirth comes easily to Rosamund. She, too, achieves a form of transcendence through giving birth, and the resemblance of Rosamund's experience to that of the Virgin Mary is clearly drawn: both women go into labour on Christmas Eve, and both deliver their babies with almost superhuman gentility and stoicism.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This type of depiction is not necessarily time or gender specific. In Penelope Mortimer's *The Pumpkin Eater* the doctor informs us that Mrs Armitage, who has given birth many times, "drops those babies like a cat, you know – it's a pleasure to watch" (p.37).

<sup>46</sup> The conceiving of Rosamund's child is depicted as almost an immaculate conception, the result of a first-time, inexperienced fumble with a mostly uninterested, bisexual friend. Whilst Drabble's portrayal of Rosamund's sexual innocence may be the author's attempt at making an illegitimate birth in the 1960s more palatable to her readers, the use of religious simile also highlights the influence that the religious authorities have had

Rosamund is praised by the midwives for being 'unbelievably quick [...] and how [she] should have made more fuss' (*M*, p.102). The more visceral aspects of birth are not mentioned, with Drabble choosing to highlight how well Rosamund felt after delivery: '[she] could have got up and walked away' (*M*, p.102). Drabble's description of birth, together with Lessing's depiction of Harriet's first four home deliveries, follows codes that, as Kaplan puts it, 'insist that mothering is totally *natural* - that a woman on giving birth becomes instantly maternal, nurturing, competent and confident at mothering' (Kaplan, p.174).

Drabble's *The Millstone* was written during the same period as Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In this ground-breaking book, which was among the first to bring into popular consciousness essentialist notions of womanhood, Friedan hypothesises that women are the victims of a false belief system:

the feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity. It says that the great mistake of Western culture, through most of its history, has been the undervaluation of this femininity. It says that this femininity is so mysterious and intuitive and close to the creation and origin of life that manmade science may never be able to understand it. But however special and different, it is in no way inferior to the nature of man; it may even in certain respects be superior. The mistake, says the mystique, the root of women's troubles in the past, is that women envied men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfilment only in

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over our image of motherhood. Harriet's babies in Lessing's *The Fifth Child* are also born around the major Christian religious festivals of Christmas and Easter. The Lovatts initially represent an idealised, traditional family constructed from Christian foundations: 'this was happiness, in the old style' (*FC*, p.28).

sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love.  
(Friedan, p.38)<sup>47</sup>

Friedan's description of the feminine mystique elucidates some of the more unconvincing aspects of Drabble's birth scene in *The Millstone*, as her description of birth observes codes of behaviour prevalent at the time of writing: the codes of a false femininity that Friedan wished to expose. The pain, blood and brutality of some labours and deliveries were simply not discussed during the 1960s. Margaret Forster, in her aptly named family memoir *Hidden Lives: A Family Memoir* (1995), remarks on her own mother's reticence at having these codes of behaviour for women challenged:

My mother, expecting to see shots of a baby in its mother's arms, all creased from birth and looking adorable, peered eagerly at the snaps and then gasped. The pictures shown of the baby emerging from between its mother's legs seemed to her pornographic – the legs apart, the bloody vagina gaping, the head a black blot bulging obscenely, and all in glorious technicolour. She was speechless, couldn't hide her revulsion. Had women really come to this? Some things, she felt, should remain private. Modesty was being lost sight of. Since she'd said often enough that in her day birth was shrouded in mystery and the shock of the reality was profound.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> According to Friedan's obituary in the *New York Times*, *The Feminine Mystique* 'ignited the contemporary woman's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world [...] and is widely regarded as one of the most influential nonfiction books of the twentieth century'. Margalit Fox, 'Betty Friedan, Who ignited Cause in *Feminine Mystique*', *New York Times*, 5 February 2006, <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)> [accessed 12 October 2010] (para.1).

<sup>48</sup> Margaret Forster, *Hidden Lives: A Family Memoir* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), p.266.

Despite fathers often now being present at the birth of their children, there is still a general degree of concealment practised in relation to childbirth. Cusk notes a 'parturitional apartheid' upheld by mothers on discussing birth, 'maintaining a sort of political *froideur* when drawn upon the subject by childless female friends' (*ALW*, p.130). Although the 1970s bore witness to a trend toward a more open attitude to childbirth (as depicted in Forster's example), in the long term this openness has had minority appeal. As the century progressed, a more conservative approach to birth re-established itself, as Figes confirms in *Life After Birth*: 'there is a huge divide between the childless and the parents because so much is not talked about' (Figes, p.viii). Currently, there are even indications of a backlash against fathers attending the birth: Dr Michel Odent, who founded the Primal Health Research Centre and was instrumental in popularising water births, has recently asserted that anyone present at a birth, apart from medical staff, can be a contributory factor in subsequent marriage break-up, mental illness and a failure of the mother and baby to bond.<sup>49</sup>

Whilst Friedan's concerns over sexual passivity and male domination are now largely passé, vestiges of the feminine mystique, with its belief in maintaining a sense of mystery concerning birth still persists. Written in 1998, *The Little House* exposes Patrick's preconceived notion of how Ruth will look and behave after giving birth:

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<sup>49</sup> Odent argues against what he calls 'the masculinisation of the birth environment'. He claims that 'Oxytocin is the love drug which helps the woman to give birth and bond with her baby. But it is also a shy hormone and it does not come out when she is surrounded by people and technology. That is what we need to start understanding'. Clare Murphy, 'Should Dads be in the delivery room?' *BBC News Channel* (25 November 2009) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8377099.stm>> [accessed 25 November 2009]

in the films he had seen such situations as these, the young mothers had sat up in bed in pretty beribboned bed jackets, and smiled adoringly at their husbands and gazed devotedly at their babies. Patrick was too intelligent to mistake Hollywood images for reality, but he had expected something more than Ruth's resentful apathy (*LH*, p.76).

Patrick ascribes to his wife a false notion of idealised femininity, which obscures, tragically, his understanding of her as a human being.

Through their descriptions of birth, these writers working between 1995-2010, wish to challenge representations of a femininity that Friedan asserts is 'mysterious and intuitive and close to the creation and origin of life' (Friedan, p.38). There exists a marked contrast, for example, between Drabble's 1960s account of effortless birth and that of Gemmell's brutal description of delivery in 'Tales of the Recent Past' (2001). Following the birth, the mother is informed that she has experienced 'an easy labour' by the midwife, a description the mother angrily refutes:

I tell her that no labour is easy, that there was a moment during it where I felt like I was splitting apart [...] I did not know I would defecate during labour. I did not know there would be so much blood. I did not know that for several hours after the birth my belly would resemble a child's attempt at baking a cake, all sunken and soft in the middle. (*GA*, p.223)

The attack against concealment extends beyond birth to include the physical and emotional hardships of new motherhood. Recent

literature is now challenging the collective silence that Friedan observed. In 2000 Simpson alludes to an embargo against complaint in 'Café Society'. The mother in the story resists the temptation to share the difficulties she has experienced with motherhood, privately reflecting that

such thoughts are dangerous to articulate anyway, bringing up into the air what has been submerged. Nearly all faces close in censorship at the merest hint of such talk. Put up and shut up is the rule, except with fellow mothers. Even then it can be taken as letting the side down. (HY, p.13)

### **Questioning their Mother's Mothering?**

An embodiment of the type of femininity described by Friedan in 1963 can be found in the character of Elizabeth, the grandmother in Gregory's *The Little House*. Coming as she does from the generation of women schooled in the arts of the feminine mystique, she does not countenance complaint about the hardships of new motherhood. Her life has been about home and family. It becomes 'obvious to Ruth', who is struggling with the transition to motherhood, that Elizabeth 'found the nightmarishly difficult task of caring for Thomas both natural and enjoyable' (LH, p.94). Whereas under Ruth's administrations, Thomas is frequently truculent and dirty, Elizabeth is adept in the arts of childcare:

it was Elizabeth who cared for him most of the time. It was Elizabeth who knew the knack of wrapping him in his white shawl, his little arms criss-crossed over his stomach, so he slept. It was Elizabeth who could hold him casually in the crook of her arm while she cooked one-handed, and it was

Elizabeth's serene face that his deep blue eyes watched. (*LH*, p.81)

Gregory explores the conflict between existing and new discourses of motherhood in her depiction of the relationship of Ruth and Elizabeth. Whilst Elizabeth has dedicated her life to her family (and as a consequence is fixated on her son and grandson), Ruth, as a millennium mother, has had a life and career outside her family, and mourns its loss. Ruth does not attempt to conceal how hard she is finding the transition to motherhood, whereas Elizabeth is concerned with making childcare and homemaking appear effortless. One scene in particular from the novel reveals the difference that exists between the feminine mystique and Gregory's turn of this century's representation of motherhood. Elizabeth discovers Ruth

in a dingy maternity dressing gown, her body, still fat with the weight of pregnancy, only partly masked by its folds. Her feet were bare, her hair limp, her face a mask of tiredness, dark shadows deeply etched under her eyes. She looked exhausted and unhappy. Elizabeth was trim in grey wool slacks and a pale cashmere jumper. She had on a light-coloured scarf pinned at the neck by a small expensive brooch; she wore the lightest of make up. Her perfume, as usual, was Chanel No 15 [*sic*]. (*LH*, p.91)<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth in *The Little House* and Mrs Armitage in Mortimer's *The Pumpkin Eater* come from the same generation of women and both are represented as victims of a false femininity that has denied them a life outside homemaking and maternity. *The Pumpkin Eater* provides a fictional illustration of Friedan's description of the restrictive nature of an idealised femininity. Part of Mortimer's exposé is the symbolic building of a tower, a shrine to the notion of femininity similar to that described by Friedan. The tower is being built to house Mrs Armitage. Four times married, her life has been devoted to caring for her enormous brood of children and various husbands. As her lack of a Christian name suggests, she is defined as a woman in relation to others: she has never



### Questioning the Sentimental: Exposing the Truth about Motherhood

Gemmell's gory and frank account of delivery has moved a long way from the glossed-over Virgin birth, or accounts of instantly beautiful babies and their instantly loving, perfectly turned-out mothers. Present-day authors appear motivated, in part, by the desire to inform their readers of what they perceive motherhood to be really like: writing, perhaps, to help the next generation of women avoid what Cusk describes as the 'expression of quiet, horrified surprise on the faces of new mothers, as if they had just opened an inappropriate Christmas present: clearly they were unprepared' (*ALW*, p.130). Similarly, Ruth in *The Little House* acknowledges that the difficulty she experiences in bonding with her son Thomas is partly due to her ignorance of what motherhood would entail:

'I didn't know what it was like' she said eventually. 'I am so tired all the time, and it's so lonely. Thomas is lovely, of course, but there's so much *washing* to do. And I spend my days wiping down work surfaces so they're clean enough. And at night ...' she broke off [...] 'he just never sleeps' (*LH*, p.117).

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had a career or outside interests of her own. Brought up as the 'perfect lady' (p.67) by a traditional patriarchal father who had hoped for a boy, she has not been encouraged to engage with the world, because she is female: "'I suppose it's not impossible" my father said [...] "for a woman to run a business ..." then he made a wry face and patted my knee, rejecting the idea' (p.65). Without independent means or self-belief, she has very little control over her own existence. Imprisoned, isolated and remote in her metaphorical (and real) tower, Mrs Armitage suffers a breakdown, triggered by the discovery of her husband's adultery, but prompted to a greater degree by the realisation of the emptiness of her own existence. She continues to desire more children because her life has 'left me in a vacuum' without a career or adult intimacy, her 'bodyguard of children' keeping both life and husband at bay: 'I had simply grabbed what I could get, the only thing I could think of to make me happy again [...] I took the only way out that I knew: I decided to have another child' (p.104).

In the twenty-first century, motherhood does not appear to offer the 'happily ever after' (*LH*, p.116) that Thomas's grandfather assumed would follow the birth of his grandson.

In *Torn in Two*, Rozsika Parker observes this change of focus: 'since 1995 [...] an astonishing number of books have been published [...] all carry the underlying message 'it was not what I expected' (Parker, R., p.xiii). Parker concludes that 'in the new motherhood literature, mothers address other mothers, speaking bitterness, telling it like it is' (Parker, R., p.xiii). This latter comment also suggests another change to manifest itself in recent motherhood fiction. In 1985, Susan Rubin Suleiman asserted in 'Writing and Motherhood' that 'mother's don't write, they are written' (Parker, R., p.10).<sup>51</sup> My own research concurs with Parker's earlier observation, finding that the most recent motherhood fiction and memoir is written by mothers for mothers.

A desire for honesty similarly inspired Simpson: 'it's important to resist the blanket picture of motherhood, the sentimental version [...] my only condemnation is for people who aren't honest, who sentimentalise. I think they do a lot of damage' (Crewe, p.24). The character of Eva in *Kevin* illustrates Simpson's point. Eva feels she has been misled by sentimental accounts of motherhood, tricked into making the biggest mistake of her life:

my expectations of motherhood were high, or I wouldn't  
have agreed to go through with it. I'd attended hungrily

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<sup>51</sup> Rozsika Parker cites S.R. Suleiman, 'Writing and Motherhood', in *The (M)other Tongue*, ed. by S.N. Garner, C. Kahane and M. Sprengnether (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.356.

to accounts from friends: you have no idea what it's like before you have one of your own. Whenever I allowed I was less than enamoured of infants and small children I was assured: I felt the same way! Couldn't stand other people's kids! But it's different – it's totally different – when they're yours. (K, p.81)

Just like the character in Samson's story 'Love at First Sight', Eva was also told by an acquaintance, "you don't just love them. You fall in love. At that moment, when you lay eyes on them for the first time – it's indescribable". Poignantly, Eva muses 'I do wish he had described it anyway. I do wish he had given it a try' (K, p.81).

Interestingly, Friedan noted a similar lack of honesty pervading the women's magazine market during the early 1960s. Her impression was confirmed by the editor of *Redbook*: 'the serious fiction writers have become too [...] inaccessible to our readers, so we're left with the formula writers'.<sup>52</sup> And yet, Friedan observed that 'in the old days, serious writers like Nancy Hale, even William Faulkner, wrote for the women's magazines and were not considered inaccessible' (Friedan, p.49).

Friedan hypothesised that perhaps the image of woman she identified as the feminine mystique 'did not permit the internal honesty, the depth of perception, and the human truth essential to good fiction' (Friedan, p.49).

Sentimentality and formula fiction became the order of the day. Lessing has also commented on the lack of depth exhibited by various critical

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<sup>52</sup> *Redbook* is an American women's magazine published by the Hearst Corporation. First published in 1903, in its early years it included short fiction by talented writers such as Jack London, Sinclair Lewis, Edith Wharton and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The subject matter of these stories ranged widely from conventional love stories to crime, mystery, politics, adventure and history. <<http://www.redbookmag.com/>>[accessed 29 March 2011]

interpretations of her novel, *The Fifth Child*, noting that 'we like pre-packaged simple messages and statements. We don't like things that are complicated, that perhaps there isn't a solution to [...] we think we can solve everything, but we can't always'.<sup>53</sup>

### Questioning a Patriarchal Conspiracy?

Perhaps, therefore, dominant representations of birth and new motherhood did not resonate with readers post millennium because they depicted an overly romanticised account of the pleasures of motherhood. This type of depiction is not only perceived in some quarters to be misleading, it is also understood as politically manipulative. In *Motherhood and Representation* Kaplan maintains that because a patriarchal society requires women to give birth to and nurture its children, it is, therefore, 'to a patriarchy's advantage to convince women that it is in their nature to do so' (Kaplan, p.4). Imelda Whelehan argues in *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (2000) that despite the laudable efforts of feminism and equal rights legislation we are still living in a patriarchy.<sup>54</sup> She dismisses Naomi Wolf's 'alleged *genderquake* – the idea that the white male elite has lost their authority and is in the throes of losing its power' and claims that such a notion 'has

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<sup>53</sup> Rothstein (para. 6 of 13).

<sup>54</sup> Whelehan further substantiates her argument that patriarchy still exists by citing images from popular culture, arguing that 'from a feminist position it is difficult not to interpret the new lad [of the 1990s] as a nostalgic revival of the old patriarchy; a direct challenge to feminism's call for social transformations by re-affirming – albeit 'ironically' – the unchanging nature of gender relations and sexual roles'. Imelda Whelehan, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (London: The Women's Press, 2000), p.6. *How She Does It* reflects both the authority of the 'new lad' culture and the enduring inequity between male and female workers with regards to pay. Kate Reddy cites the fictional case of 'Gayle Fender, a bond trader, or rather an ex-bond trader. She's suing her firm, Lawrence Herbert, for sex discrimination because male colleagues got far bigger bonuses than she did for less good results' (*HSD*, p.18).

done little to change the attitudes of the majority of men to women' (Whelehan, p.6).

Hence, Kaplan's *male conspiracy argument* is that depictions of beautiful babies, instantaneous love, and the promise of a love surpassing all previous experiences of that emotion have been contrived by a predominantly male establishment to present a very appealing proposition for women. This suspicion undermines the more sentimental representations of beatific motherhood, as well as posing a problem for the turn of this century authors considered here, who wish to rearticulate motherhood's pleasures. Differentiating between a genuine, subjective pleasure, as opposed to one that has been engineered or endorsed 'under the auspices of the father or the state', is very difficult indeed (Kaplan, p.16).

### **Questioning the Allure of the 'Maternal Sacrifice' Narrative**

Kaplan asserts that one of the reasons 'for the endurance of the maternal sacrifice narrative is that it has insisted that this type of mothering is natural and rewarding' (Kaplan, p.32). This narrative also colludes with the essentialist belief that it is a biological truth that women are pre-disposed to want children more than men. Simpson's character Dorrie in 'Hey Yeah Right Get A Life' acknowledges 'her insane lusting' for another child, despite her experience of motherhood being one of 'loss of inner life [...], lack of any purchase in the outside world, and loss of all respect; continuous unavoidable Lilliputian demands; numbness, apathy and biscuits. She was at the end of her rope' (HY, p.54). Dorrie has to hide

her desire for another child from her husband, Max. Having children has turned Dorrie, by her own admission, 'completely soft' (*HY*, p.37).

Motherhood has exposed her to a world of feeling. In another story in *Hey Yeah* concerning Dorrie's family (entitled 'Hurrah for the Hols'), Dorrie acknowledges that she finds it difficult to pass by a weeping child in the street: 'her throat tightened and her eyes prickled, she called herself every sort of fool as she trudged on; and she physically ached to pick up and hold the weeping child, and tell it there, there, there, there, then smooth it down and stroke its hand until it slept'.<sup>55</sup> Her husband is portrayed as feeling much less for children than his wife, including his own. He sees them more as an irritation: 'he needed a romantic motive or life wasn't worth living' (*HY*, p.50).

Myerson's novel *Something Might Happen* is also an examination, in part, of the seemingly inexplicable appeal of motherhood. Tess has recently given birth and her world is one of breastfeeding, nappies, school runs and meal times. Despite the seemingly mundane nature of her existence and that motherhood leaves Tess feeling like 'a dead person, trying to surface' (*SMH*, p.2), she persisted in wanting her fourth child, against her husband's and daughter's wishes and her decision has left the family struggling to cope. She is aware of the irrationality of her desire and acknowledges the influence of a particularly seductive image: 'there's nothing to beat walking down the street on a sunny day with [the children] all clean and happy and no one crying or fighting behind you

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<sup>55</sup> Helen Simpson, 'Hurrah for the Hols', in *HY*, pp.160-79, (p.178).

and knowing just how it looks. A perfect mother with her perfect life' (SMH, p.5).

In *The Fifth Child*, Harriet similarly adheres to the notion that 'family life was the basis for a happy one' (FC, p.12), despite the widespread family opposition to her ever increasing brood. Having had four children in quick succession, Harriet is 'frantic, exhausted ... she was peevish; she lost her temper; she burst into tears ... Paul lay whimpering in his pram, ignored' (FC, p.41). Both *Something* and *The Fifth Child* are a comment on maternal excess, or as Harriet's mother expresses it, 'the trouble with Harriet is that her eyes have always been bigger than her stomach' (FC, p.34). Crucially, these novels provoke the reader to consider what would prompt these characters to pursue conception when it is obviously not in their, or their family's, best interest.<sup>56</sup> The birth of the Lovatts' fifth child destroys the family. Harriet ends the novel sitting alone at the family table, once the scene of family feasts, love and laughter: 'and then the wide shine of the table seemed to darken, and there was Ben, the alien, the destroyer' (FC, p.156). Lessing appears to be critical of Harriet's desire for children. She pursues a large family despite her inability to cope, either physically or financially.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, in *Something*, Tess's life deteriorates with the birth of her fourth child and in the course of the novel, her older daughter dies, partly as an indirect

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<sup>56</sup> Fredric Jameson's twinning of romance, redemption through sacrifice and utopian impulses helps to elucidate the irresistible allure of children for some women. Jameson has proposed the idea of the master discourse to include 'the presence of detectable utopian impulses in mass culture' (Rivkin and Ryan, p.1026).

<sup>57</sup> Not only does the maternal sacrifice narrative insist that this type of mothering is natural and rewarding, it also circumscribes the terms of the self-sacrifice. If a woman transgresses by wanting more children than society deems acceptable, she transforms from natural and unselfish into unnatural and selfish, as Harriet's mother makes plain to her daughter: 'I'm your servant, I do the work of a servant in this house [...] you are very selfish' (FC, p.42).

consequence of Tess's desire for more children.<sup>58</sup> These novels illustrate the allure of sentimental representations of motherhood, demonstrating how persuasive and damaging such depictions can be.

The debate over what is specifically female experience is reflected in these texts. Opinions vary over whether one is *born* or *made* a woman, with essentialism continuing to be a vexed issue within feminism itself.<sup>59</sup> Fuss acknowledges that she felt compelled to write her book *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* by the desire to 'break or in some way weaken the hold which the essentialist/constructionist binarism has on feminist theory' (Fuss, p.250).

<sup>60</sup> This polarisation of how femininity is perceived caused a division within feminism which became known as the third wave, beginning in the early 1990s. At its core, third-wave feminism sought to challenge what it deemed to be second-wave's essentialist definitions of femininity.

Social constructionists argue that essentialist portrayals of motherhood can be conflated with a type of biological reductionism that can fuel discrimination against women. For, if women choose to become mothers because it is in their nature to do so, and because they, uniquely

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<sup>58</sup> See also chapters three and four for further analysis of the death of Tess's daughter in *Something*.

<sup>59</sup> Although not written with motherhood as its focus, one of the first examples of a text that argued that the discourses of the authorities control and manipulate women is de Beauvoir's treatise *The Second Sex*. This detailed analysis of women's oppression became a foundational tract for contemporary feminism and coins the well-known phrase 'one is not born a woman, but becomes one' (de Beauvoir in Humm, p.48). De Beauvoir's position is obviously anti-essentialist, arguing that the natural is *produced* by the social. Her analysis focuses on the social construction of woman as the 'Other': 'no biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female represents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine' (de Beauvoir, p.295).

<sup>60</sup> Fuss expands upon the reasons for the division over essentialism which helped to create feminism's third wave: 'the essentialist holds that the natural is *repressed* by the social, whilst the constructionist maintains that the natural is *produced* by the social' (Fuss, p.251).



(rather than men), derive so much pleasure from nurturing, why should mothers not be prepared to miss out in other respects? In *How She Does It*, Pearson exposes how Kate Reddy experiences discrimination at work because, as her friend explains, her male superiors harbour the belief that women are hot-wired to want children more than men:

‘the thing is, Kate’, Jill said, ‘they treat us as if they’re doing us a great favour by letting us go back to work after we’ve had a child. And the price we have to pay for that favour is not making a fuss, not letting on how life can never be the same for us again. But always remember it’s we who are doing them the favour. We’re perpetuating the human race and there is nothing more important than that’. (*HSD*, p.230)<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, in Simpson’s ‘Hey Yeah Right Get A Life’, Dorrie’s husband justifies his recent sacking of a pregnant employee on the grounds that ‘if she chooses to have a baby, that’s her choice’ (*HY*, p.53). Forna asserts in *Mother of All Myths: How Society Moulds and Constrains Mothers*, that the belief that a woman’s biology dictates her desire for children is culturally engineered and has no grounding in biology: ‘the notion [...] that the urge to have a child strikes all women at a particular time, without warning and independent of all intellectual thought processes [...] is palpable rubbish and has no scientific basis whatsoever’ (Forna, p.4).

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<sup>61</sup> However, Pearson does appear to believe in a desire for children that is unique to women. In another passage in *How She Does It* Kate claims, ‘I’ve seen it in my friends. They get to their mid-thirties, panic [...] embark on IVF, painful and ruinous. Sometimes it works; mostly it doesn’t. We think we’ve outwitted Mother Nature, but Nature isn’t called Mother for nothing. She has her way of slapping us down, making us feel small. The world isn’t going to end with a bang, but with a woman staring through a glass panel at her frozen eggs and wondering if she’ll ever have time to defrost them’ (*HSD*, p.165).

The variety and disparity of opinion concerning female sexual specificity can account for the contradictions in representations of motherhood in post-millennium fiction, reflecting this diversity of opinion. Bridget O'Connor's short story 'The Whole of Europe' (2001) in *Gas and Air* endorses the notion of the female biological clock.<sup>62</sup> Ruth is a former party-girl driven to distraction by the desire to *M & C* (meet and conceive). At thirty-eight 'her eggs were old. Each month she could hear their suicide notes, a kind of Granular groan, as they plopped to their death down her uterus [...] who knew she would end up alone and *feeling like this?*' (*GA*, p.139). She believes she can hear her own body ridiculing her: 'Tick tock [...] Get our Miss Choosy' (*GA*, p.142). So despite the recent challenge to the notion of love at first sight and sentimental depictions of birth, sometimes the very same novel will support the idea that, for example, on a biological level, women need children to complete themselves as subjects. Lawrence subscribed to this essentialist view as long ago as 1915, with Anna in *The Rainbow* becoming 'complete in herself' upon the conception of her child (*R*, p.220).<sup>63</sup> Weldon parodies this belief in 1980, for when Mabs falls pregnant, she 'felt the fury of her unconscious passions allayed, and could be almost happy. And, so, pregnant, became ordinary, like everyone else, and used her hands to cook, and clean, and sew, and soothe, and not as psychic conductors' (*P*,

<sup>62</sup> Bridget O'Connor, 'The Whole of Europe', *GA*, pp.135-146.

<sup>63</sup> Millett ridicules Lawrence's belief in this notion in her analysis of his depiction of the childless Constance Chatterley, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. She is 'neither a wife nor a mother, yearning for a child, her "womb" contracting at certain stated intervals, she seeks her fleeting youth in unsatisfactory trips to the mirror, and endless visits to some hen pheasants, whose "pondering female blood" rebukes "the agony of her own female forlornness" while affording her some solace by being "the only things in the world that warmed her heart". In the presence of these formidable creatures she "feels on the brink of fainting all the time", and the sight of a pheasant chick breaking its shell reduces her to hysterical weeping' (Millett, p.243).

p.130). Alice Jerome's story 'Gwendolyn' (2001) confirms that this notion endures in fiction to the present day. While Gwendolyn is experiencing a difficult and prolonged labour, she is sustained by the belief that 'if I am taken into the microdot of death I have the satisfaction of being more complete as I disappear'.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Rosie Waitt's mother character in 'In the Stars' (2002) feels 'a strong sense of completeness' upon giving birth to her baby.<sup>65</sup> These passages are written without irony: the idea of fulfilment is intended to comfort, not to irritate. Even Gemmell, who debunks codes of femininity in relation to birth in 'Tales of the Recent Past', subscribes to an essentialist understanding of the pregnant female: 'I am resting, nesting, like a she-wolf retreating to the hills [...] I can feel some urge that is as old and wild and howling deep inside me' (GA, p.222). Perhaps most surprising of all, Eva, who engages in a battle of 'unrelenting ferocity' with the more conventional expectations of motherhood in Shriver's *Kevin*, is shown to be haunted by her inability to deliver what she suspects to be a *natural* instinct to mother. Eva longs to feel

that overriding urge I'd always heard about, the narcotic pining that draws childless women ineluctably to strangers' strollers in parks [...] I wanted to be drowned by a hormonal imperative [yet] when I hadn't gone into maternal heat by my mid-thirties, I worried that there was something wrong with me, something missing. (*K*, p.27)

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<sup>64</sup> Alice Jerome, 'Gwendolyn', GA, pp.158-79 (p.167).

<sup>65</sup> Rosie Waitt, 'In the Stars', GA, pp.257-67 (p.267).

### Questioning What is Natural: Birth Control and Fertility Treatments

The proliferation of texts that focus on maternity at the turn of the twenty-first century is to a certain extent an expression of a desire to re-examine what the word *natural* means and how this affects our understanding of motherhood. This desire has arisen, in part, from the last fifty years of feminism and from the essentialist, social constructionist divisions with it. In addition to which, the introduction of the contraceptive pill and the more recent scientific advancements in infertility treatment have further questioned the idea of what is considered to be natural.

In an historical period when there was less control over conception than today, women were more free to fear what the coming of a new life meant for them. The character of Eva in Shriver's *Kevin* has more of a *choice* than her predecessors as to whether or not to become a mother. She can now avoid pregnancy, as she wryly observes, 'without joining a nunnery' (*K*, p.24).<sup>66</sup> In fact, such is the level of control modern mothers can exercise over conception, that Eva and Franklin 'even set [themselves] a deadline, for pity's sake – [Eva's] thirty-seventh birthday that August- since [they] didn't want a child who could still be living at home in [their] sixties' (*K*, p.13).

Mrs Morel in Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, by contrast, cannot exercise this degree of control over whether or not she becomes pregnant. She feels that 'sometimes life takes hold of one, carries the

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<sup>66</sup> Birth control is regarded by Richard in Weldon's *Puffball* as a contributory factor in the undermining of what is natural for women. Richard is scornful of his wife's attempts at managing her own fertility. Referring dismissively to his wife's contraceptive pills, he complains, "I don't understand why someone who likes things to be natural", he said, "could ever rely on anything so unnatural as these" (*P*, p.17).

body along, accomplishes one's history [...] what ha[s] [*she*] to do with all this? Even the child [*she*] [is] going to have! It doesn't seem as [*she*] were taken into account' (*SL*, p.12). Mrs Morel regrets the loss of freedom her femininity has imposed on her. Heavily pregnant with her third child, she looks ahead to a life that makes her feel 'buried alive' (*SL*, p.12). Significantly, however, Mrs Morel (unlike Eva) is free to regret the coming of her child because she didn't actively pursue conception: 'she could not afford to have this third [baby]. She did not want it' (*SL*, p.12). There is no sense of guilt attached to her regret because she conceived naturally and, therefore, she is more able than Eva to move past her feelings of regret and resentment. Following Paul's birth,

in her arms lay the delicate baby. Its deep blue eyes, always looking up at her unblinking, seemed to draw her innermost thoughts out of her. She no longer loved her husband; she had not wanted this child to come, and there it lay in her arms and pulled at her heart. She felt as if the navel string that had connected its frail body with hers had not been broken. A wave of hot love went over her to the infant. (*SL*, p.34)

The implications of choice (and the possibility of having made the wrong choice), however, continue to burden and distort Eva's experience of mothering:

what possessed us? We were so happy. Why then, did we take the stake of all we had and place it all on the outrageous gamble of having a child? Of course you consider the very putting of that question profane [...] it's against the rules, isn't it, to actually have a baby and spend any time at all on

that banished parallel life in which you didn't? (K, p.12)

Because Eva chose to become pregnant, regret at the loss of her former life becomes taboo, *against the rules*. Eva and Kevin, therefore, become stuck in a mire of resentment and blame that, culturally (as the title implies) the family are not allowed to talk about, because children are now chosen and it is considered natural for mothers and sons to love each other. The novel is an illustration that although mothers today have more option over whether to become a mother, they are no more aware than their predecessors of what motherhood will be like for them. True choice, for which one could feel culpable, assumes a degree of prior knowledge. Attention thus inevitably focuses on whether women are naturally pre-disposed to enjoy nurturing.

In part, the recent increase in fictional explorations of motherhood is a response to this anxiety over choosing whether to become a mother, as well as how one becomes a mother. Julia Darling's short story 'Pearl' in *Gas and Air* (1995) expresses this confusion and anxiety over what is natural, female experience through a single, lesbian mother of one. She secures herself a second child through unconventional and somewhat unromantic means: '[she] got the sperm through a self-help group. [She] administered it with a cake-icing syringe'.<sup>67</sup> The story is, in part, an exploration of the creation of gender and gender stereotypes: '[she] [is] not all that keen on traditional baby clothes of white, pink or blue. [She] like[s] to dress [her] babies in yellow or red' (GA, p. 58). It also illustrates the discrimination experienced by those who sit outside of what our

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<sup>67</sup> Julia Darling, 'Pearl', GA, pp.57-62 (p.59).

society deems to be *natural*. When her lesbianism is exposed at her daughter's school, the mother is labelled a 'pervert' in the playground, from which point on her 'daughter makes [her] wear a dress and lipstick to school. [She] feels like [she's] acting' (GA, p.61).

This short story could serve as a fictional companion piece to illustrate Monique Wittig's point of view as expressed in 'One is not born a Woman' (1981).<sup>68</sup> Wittig extends the social constructionist argument to another level, positing what she describes as 'the material feminist' position, where she maintains that female oppression will only end by destroying the notion of *women* as a *natural group*. Her hypothesis rests on her claim that

what a material analysis does by reasoning, a lesbian society accomplishes practically: not only is there no natural group 'women' (we lesbians are living proof of it), but as individuals as well we question 'woman', which for us as for Simone de Beauvoir, is only a myth. (Wittig, p.220)

Wittig's ideas are radical, but Darling's 'Pearl' stops short of expounding lesbianism as a form of political protest. However, the story does contain an interesting twist of its own. The experiences of the nameless, isolated, disenfranchised lesbian mother run parallel with those of Pearl, the barren lollipop lady who expresses her thwarted maternal longing by knitting baby clothes for expectant mothers on the

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<sup>68</sup> Monique Wittig, 'One is not Born a Woman' in *The Straight Mind* (1981); (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp.9-20, reprinted in *Feminisms*, ed., by Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 220-26.

school run.<sup>69</sup> Although both are outsiders in the school community, the lesbian mother is instrumental in getting Pearl discharged from her post, following an incident in which Pearl holds on to the other woman's newborn child a little too fiercely.

Both women become ostracised by the school for their *unnatural* desire for a child.<sup>70</sup> Whilst banished, Pearl decides to follow the example of her accuser and make herself a baby in her own way: 'I see the baby's face then. It is small and perfect, beautifully crafted in skin-coloured wool. Pearl has knitted herself a baby' (GA, p.62). By intertwining the two mothers' narratives, the story provokes the reader to question evolving ideas of *natural* and *normal*, as the story is permeated with the ethical unease that these definitions provoke. Whereas the lesbian mother's refusal to conform to the traditional image of the self-sacrificing mother (by refusing to choose between her sexuality or her desire for family) engenders our sympathy, the de-sexualised, barren Pearl presents a greater challenge to our notions of *natural*.

This story explores how femininity is intimately connected to our understanding of *natural* motherhood. In an unlikely turn of events, Pearl is imbued with femininity as a consequence of her own, unique act of creation (having knitted herself a baby). Prior to motherhood, Pearl is awkward and masculine in her ill-fitting lollipop uniform. Afterwards, the

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<sup>69</sup> The mother's namelessness focuses the reader on her lesbianism, as one is forced to define her by her sexual orientation.

<sup>70</sup> What is normal maternal feeling is an area that is fraught with difficulties for women. In *The Fifth Child* David castigates his mother in public, accusing her, "you are not maternal," said David. "It's not your nature. But Harriet is" (p.19). Yet later in the story it is Harriet's turn to be judged as abnormal, for Harriet is condemned for being too maternal, a charge she responds to passionately: "perhaps we ought to have been born into another country. Do you realise that having six children, in another part of the world, it would be normal, nothing shocking about it - they aren't made to feel like criminals" (FC, p.22).



lesbian mother is completely taken aback by the change in Pearl: 'at first I don't recognise her [...] she is wearing a summer hat and looking undeniably handsome' (GA, p.61). 'Pearl' highlights our propensity to judge mothers as well as illustrating the degree to which their fitness to mother is to be decided by their sexual presentation of themselves. The reader is made uncomfortable by being presented with a choice: does the barren lollipop lady or the lesbian deserve a child more? Since the mother in 'Pearl' is not willing to sacrifice either her sexuality or her desire for family, the story becomes an ethical dilemma. Being also typical of its postmodern milieu, the ethical issues posed by the narrative remain unresolved.

The growing opposition to dominant, universal and essentialist representations of motherhood has encouraged exploration of the mother for her uniqueness, precipitating writers to 'open up' the mother as a subject. Essentialist interpretations of motherhood have become a focal point for those concerned with identity politics, particularly within the arenas of gender and race equality. Forna argues that prior to the 1990s, feminists had 'concentrated exclusively on Western women as mothers and the Western concept of motherhood' (Forna, p.21). One of the most vocal critics of the women's liberation movement has been the African American feminist Gloria Jean Watkins (using the pseudonym 'bell hooks') who argued that second wave feminism had overlooked questions of class and race and had thus failed to address the issues that divided women. She highlighted the lack of minority voices in the women's movement in her book *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre*

(1984).<sup>71</sup> Much of the academic enquiry into motherhood during the early 1990s, therefore, became a 'celebration of difference', promoted by third-wave feminists such as hooks and Lorde.<sup>72</sup> Fictional accounts of the mother have also sought to fill this void: to represent the experiences of mothers from other cultures. *Gas and Air*, for example, includes stories of pregnancy and early motherhood from a range of cultures: Judith Byran's *Deliverance* (2001),<sup>73</sup> David Guterson's *East of the Mountains* (1999),<sup>74</sup> Simone Lazaroo's *The True Body* (2001)<sup>75</sup> and Chandani Lokugé's *Mala's Baby* (2001).<sup>76</sup> These efforts, although laudable in themselves, resulted in a lack of attention being paid to the white, middle-class mother's experience during the early 1990s, which in part may have contributed to the recent expression of confusion over how one should feel as this type of a mother.

### Questioning What to Feel as a Mother

One such depiction of white, middle-class motherhood is to be found in Cusk's memoir *A Life's Work*. Cusk draws her reader's attention to the current confusion over how one should *feel* as a mother, acknowledging feelings of 'profound bewilderment' after giving birth to her daughter.

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<sup>71</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (Cambridge MA: South End Press, 1984).

<sup>72</sup> Many regard third-wave feminism as part of the postmodernist movement, understanding the feminist challenge to essentialism to be inspired by postmodern ideas. Hence, Terry Eagleton claims in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* that *postmodernism's* 'single most enduring achievement [is] the fact that it has helped to place questions of sexuality, gender and ethnicity so firmly on the political agenda'. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.22. The relationship between postmodernism and third-wave feminism is further discussed in chapter two.

<sup>73</sup> Judith Bryan, 'Deliverance', in *GA*, pp. 63-74.

<sup>74</sup> David Guterson, 'East of the Mountains', in *GA*, pp.188-195.

<sup>75</sup> Simone Lazaroo, 'The True Body', in *GA*, pp. 225-234.

<sup>76</sup> Lokué Chandani, 'Mala's Baby', in *GA*, pp.105-113.

Contrary to her expectations, she cannot find 'any connection between my physical implication in the fact of her existence, and the emotional world I imagined would automatically accompany it' (*ALW*, p.53). She contrasts her experience of an initial *lack* of feeling to that of Lily Bart, the heroine of Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* (1905).<sup>77</sup> Lily, who in life has been a shameless socialite, has traded on her beauty to find 'material meaning' (*ALW*, p.46) for herself: in death, however, she finds ultimate solace and fulfilment by imagining herself cradling the baby of a servant girl.<sup>78</sup> Cusk understands the baby symbolically, as the vision of Lily's

squandered femininity, a ghostly image of mother and child, their bodies entwined, rising from the brittle broken shell of her useless beauty. Through this image Lily finally finds the physical warmth, the closeness, the commitment that has been lacking [...]: here are love and responsibility, resolution, provision, peace. (*ALW*, p.50)

Yet Cusk's own experience of caring for a newborn is the very opposite to that described in the *House of Mirth*. Cusk introduces the reader to her house, with baby newly ensconced, as a house of *loss*: 'it is only when I walk through the front door to my house that I realise things have changed. It is as if I have come to the house of someone who has just died, someone I can't believe has gone' (*ALW*, p.50). By paralleling

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<sup>77</sup> Cusk does not provide details of her source material for this quote. Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905); (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>78</sup> Certain texts suggest that a woman needs filling up, either by a man or a child: that she is not complete as herself. In *Incendiary*, Cleave extends this idea to include female desire. The novel's female protagonist craves sex because 'it was pitiful all that emptiness whimpering for something to fill it [...] you wouldn't know the first thing about it, you're not a woman' (*I*, p.139).

her own homecoming with her new baby with that of Lily Bart's tragic demise, Cusk invites the reader to compare Lily's feeling of completeness with her own feelings of bereavement for her lost self. Cusk's depiction contradicts Lawrence *et al's* assumption that a childless woman is defined by a sense of lack, of unfulfilled feminine purpose. For Cusk, the baby itself creates a feeling of lack, a loss of self, as opposed to filling it. In Cusk's depiction, the nature of the mother's experience has changed exponentially from that described by Wharton at the beginning of the twentieth-century, and Cusk is clearly disconcerted by the change.

Confusion over how it should feel to be a mother prevails in post millennium fiction. Despite the idea of maternal ambivalence being operative in psychology since the 1930s and writers such as Jane Lazarre in *The Mother Knot* (1987), acknowledging that 'the only thing which seems to be eternal and natural in motherhood is ambivalence', contemporary writers still experience guilt at articulating these emotions.<sup>79</sup> This conflict is evident in Samson's short story 'Love at First Sight'. On an intellectual level, the story has at its centre the desire to portray mother-love as a learned, as opposed to an innate, aspect of motherhood. However, the sense of elation and relief at having delivered the correct *natural* response on the delivery of her third child is palpable:

my third baby lay in my arms. I breathed him in. The top of his head was for nuzzling, so warm and buttery. His pastel face was smooth and sweet as a sugared almond. He was newborn Charlie and newborn Joe, and he was newborn

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<sup>79</sup> Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot* (London: Virago, 1987) p.ix. Rozsika Parker cites the work of Lazarre in *Torn in Two*, p.25.

himself. I wouldn't have been able to tear my eyes away from his even if I had wanted to. It was only later, as he slept moulded to my belly, that I realised I hadn't counted his fingers and toes, or looked for faults, or wasted time wondering if his father liked him: love is like that. (GA, p.35)

Although this conclusion is not at odds with the story's central theme of learning how to love through the process of being a mother to her first two children, her joy at being able to love her third child 'at first sight' is obvious.

Similarly, Eva's relief in *Kevin* is tangible when she can finally offer her son unconditional love. Despite Eva's understanding that on an intellectual level it is no surprise that she found the transition to motherhood hard, having 'been used to airports, sea views, museums [...] [and] suddenly [she] was stuck in the same few rooms, with Lego' (K, p.56), emotionally Eva has suspected that, she 'was not following the program, that [she] had dismally failed us and [their] newborn baby. That [she] was, frankly, a freak' (K, p.83). However, like 'Love at First Sight', the novel's conclusion shares a sense of elation when Eva at last feels able to let 'nature take its course' (K, p.83). Despite her early ambivalence toward motherhood, her growing reservations about Kevin, and his eventual murderous acts, Eva triumphantly proclaims on the novel's last page, 'I love my son' (K, p.400).<sup>80</sup> These recent fictional characters demonstrate a palpable sense of relief at having at last complied with the very 'program' their authors wish to question. The degree to which author and character share this sense of relief is

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<sup>80</sup> The conclusion to *Kevin* will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

impossible to determine; however, the sense of pleasure intrinsic in these depictions is undeniable. For being considered a natural mother is also to be considered a *good* mother. By challenging more traditional representations of motherhood, recent writers are also challenging a generalised, moral ideal: a model for goodness.

## Chapter Two –

### Discourses of Maternal Sacrifice: Taboo and Transgression

This chapter considers the endurance of the maternal sacrifice narrative, where it has been constructed and by whom, and how the discourse of self-sacrifice is depicted in turn of this century fiction and memoir.

Through textual analysis, it considers how ideals can influence behaviour (of both writer and character) and to this purpose it engages with the work of Michel Foucault (1926-84). The discussion also explores how postmodernism in general and Foucault's ideas in particular have coalesced with feminist methodology to create an understanding of the ideal mother as a construct: and how this idea has shaped how motherhood has been approached as a theoretical subject.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter will reflect on how the exacting nature of Foucault's work also has the potential to undermine not only the social constructionist feminist critiques of the figure of the mother it helped to nourish, but also those writing creatively about motherhood following the postmodern challenge to *the truth*. It argues that as a consequence of certain postmodern ideas, some writers have been inspired to re-imagine motherhood in a world without meaning and to this purpose this chapter

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<sup>1</sup> Although in interviews Foucault consistently refused to be identified with postmodernism, his work is seen by many to advocate a form of critique that embraces postmodernist principles. Whilst Martha Nussbaum criticised Foucault for his 'historical incompleteness and lack of conceptual clarity' she nevertheless singled him out for providing 'the only important work to have entered philosophy under the banner of postmodernism'. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.40.

will conclude with a discussion of Shriver's novel *Kevin* and Cleave's novel *Incendiary*.

### **Postmodernism – The Zeitgeist of the Twenty-First Century**

Specifically, postmodern thinking denies 'norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities' (Eagleton, T., p.vii). It does so on the grounds that there can be no absolutes and that everything is relative.<sup>2</sup>

Postmodernism's 'dogmatic anti-essentialism', combined with its 'end-of-history' thinking, challenges universal meanings and ultimate truths (Eagleton T., p.vii): and its ideas contributed to the creation of third-wave feminism (dating from the late 1980s).<sup>3</sup> Traditional representations of the mother which depict her as a universal ideal, as a figure that embodies essential characteristics of unconditional love and self-sacrifice or as a repository of ultimate human truths, therefore, are a natural target for postmodernist theories and third-wave feminists.<sup>4</sup>

More generally, this chapter proposes that contemporary writers will have absorbed the intellectual climate of the zeitgeist, even if they are not well-versed in feminist theory or the complex and often contradictory

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is itself contradictory as it defines moral relativism as an absolute.

<sup>3</sup> I am not suggesting that feminism and postmodernism are similar entities. Feminism is a transforming political movement, whereas postmodernism is a collection of ideas.

<sup>4</sup> Relevant to the critical understandings of the mother in the second half of the twentieth century is the postmodernist challenge to universals. Again, this suspicion arose with the assertion that language itself was not, as previously assumed, a universal signifier of things. White discusses the connection between undermining the status of language and the postmodern rejection of understanding man as a universal figure: 'since in the eighteenth century language [had been] regarded as timeless, as having no history, and universal, as being governed everywhere by the same grammatical and syntactical rules, then not only knowledge but also its object, *man*, was considered to be characterised by this same timelessness and universality' (White, p.123).



philosophies of postmodernism.<sup>5</sup> Here, Dick Hebdige comments on the current cultural pervasiveness of postmodernism, as well as the term's openness to interpretation:

when it becomes possible for people to describe as 'postmodern' the décor of a room, the design of a building, the diegesis of a film, the construction of a record, or a 'scratch' video, a television commercial, or an arts documentary, or the 'intertextual' relations between them, the layout of a page in a fashion magazine or critical journal, an anti-teleological tendency within epistemology, the attack on the 'metaphysics of presence', a general attenuation of feeling, the collective chagrin and morbid projections of a post-War generation of baby boomers confronting disillusioned middle-age, the predicament of reflexivity, a group of rhetorical tropes, a proliferation of surfaces, a new phase in commodity fetishism, a fascination for images, codes and styles, a process of cultural, political or existential fragmentation and/or crisis, the 'de-centring' of the subject, an 'incredulity towards metanarratives', the replacement of unitary power axes by a plurality of power discourse formation, the 'implosion of meaning', the collapse of cultural hierarchies [...]: when it becomes possible to describe all these things as 'postmodern' (or more simply using a current abbreviation as 'post' or 'very post') then it's clear we are in the presence of a buzzword.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Postmodernism developed as an intellectual movement from the 1950s onwards and is a banner for a collection of often contradictory ideologies. I am using this term to express a cultural consciousness of the times in which we live, the post-postmodern zeitgeist of the twenty-first century. More specifically, postmodernism is a term used to express a tendency in contemporary culture to question the notion of truth and to express suspicion of global cultural narratives. It involves the belief that apparent realities are only social constructs, as they are subject to perception and change constantly according to time and place.

<sup>6</sup> Dick Hebdige, 'Postmodernism and "The Other Side"', in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996).

Postmodernism is now often used as a term to describe the times in which we live, *as distinct from what has gone before*. In *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1997), Terry Eagleton discusses postmodernity as a word which, for many, is used to describe changes in our 'real material conditions' whilst its derivative, postmodernism, depicts 'a form of contemporary culture' (as described by Hebdige). Whilst remaining reticent as to his own position on the nature of the relationship between the two terms, Eagleton states that *some would claim* that recent transformations in cultural values have sprung from

an historic shift in the West to a new form of capitalism – to the ephemeral de-centralised world of technology, consumerism and the culture industry, in which the service, finance and information industries triumph over traditional manufacture [...] [whilst] postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects some of this epochal change, in a depthless, de-centered, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between 'high' and 'popular', as well as between art and everyday experience. (Eagleton, T., p.vii)<sup>7</sup>

Writers depicting motherhood today work within these 'real material conditions' and would not have remained oblivious to 'this style of culture'. In *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* Cusk refers to a seismic shift in the history of ideas which she describes as 'an apocalypse' in which 'a world of knowledge has gone up in flames,' and

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<sup>7</sup> In this passage, Eagleton is making the distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity. Postmodernity is commonly understood to describe 'the real material conditions' of the West since the 1950s onwards. The term encompasses changes to social and political institutions and conditions; see also, Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1990).

suggests 'the point is that this is a new – in many ways a better – world. You are its first mother' (*ALW*, p.112)

### **Questioning What is Sacred**

Postmodernism denotes a point of departure from the modernist principles and values associated with the modernity of the twentieth century and this is significant to the study of the mother, since it provides an insight into why certain aspects of sentimentalised motherhood are now being questioned by turn of this century writers. Cusk's 'apocalypse' suggests that a line has been drawn under earlier experiences of motherhood, a consequence of which is that information on how to be a mother is now lost or been rendered redundant. She does not discuss postmodernism specifically but refers to a 'chain of command' having been broken and 'the secrets' of previous generations having been lost. Cusk proposes that contemporary mothers have become detached from previous representations or *meanings* ascribed to motherhood.

Despite postmodernism's elusive nature from an ideological perspective postmodern beliefs coalesced during the 1980s and 1990s to create a general cultural tone of scepticism, challenge and criticism that has endured into the twenty-first century. Postmodern suspicion of 'classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity' (Eagleton, T., p.vii) has fuelled an intellectual, cultural and creative environment where nothing is sacred, where all existing perceptions of what has gone before are to be questioned, critiqued and reinvestigated. Arguably, therefore, the detectable increase in contesting depictions of motherhood that

emerges at the beginning of the twenty-first century can partly be interpreted as a postmodern response to the mother as a subject.

### **The Enduring Ideal of Maternal Sacrifice**

It is curious, therefore, that the myth of the ideal mother has not been contested further still, given the widely acknowledged belief that we live in an 'epoch of transgression',<sup>8</sup> or at the very least, 'enlightened times' - a term used by Figes when describing some of the changes that the feminist movement helped to establish: 'women can drive, work, buy their own homes and choose whether or not to have children' (Figes, p.ix).<sup>9</sup> Given the century of change that preceded the recent accounts of mothering considered earlier, it could be argued that writers appear to be taking comparatively small steps towards undermining the still dominant discourse of what makes an ideal mother. In *Torn in Two* Rozsika Parker subscribes to the notion that this is in fact because

the faster women's lives change, the more ossified and stereotyped become dominant representations of idealised motherhood. Despite changing beliefs about babies' capacities and thus childcare priorities, the representation of ideal motherhood is still almost exclusively made of self-abnegation, unstinting love, intuitive knowledge of nurturance and unalloyed pleasure in children. (Parker, R., p.26)

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<sup>8</sup> The artist Gavin Turk comments on the general relaxing of certain codes of behaviour, perceiving the postmodern society of the twenty-first century to be, 'the epoch of transgression', Vinny Lee, 'Turk's Delight', *The Times Magazine*, 7 October 2006, pp.84-91.

<sup>9</sup> Figes makes her point whilst lamenting the *lack* of progress made with regard to the more difficult aspects of motherhood: 'I find it extraordinary then that anyone should think that women should still be fobbed off with half-truths about one of the most profound and important experiences of their lives' (Figes, p.ix).

## Universal Perfection and Individual Failings

A dominant feature of recent fictional accounts of mothering is a relentless comparison between characters' individual experience of mothering and that of the image of the ideal mother. This comparison contributes to the guilt evident in these representations, with twenty-first-century mothering being depicted as having fallen victim to 'the guilt inducing effect of an inability to live up to the maternal ideal' (Parker, R., p.35). In Gregory's *The Little House*, Ruth self-medicates in an attempt to banish her guilt over not being able to live up to the maternal ideal and enjoy being at home caring for her family. Ruth confides her reluctance to stay at home full-time with her baby to a former work colleague:

'I love Patrick, and I love Thomas, and I'd lay down my life for them. But if you asked me whether I'd rather go home now and look after them, or go to work right now, I'd far rather go and do the job I am good at with people who like me for what I am and not because I am married to them, or gave birth to them'. (*LH*, p.145)

Ruth suffers unendurable feelings of guilt at her unwillingness to sacrifice her own happiness for that of her child, and she takes Amitriptyline to make her feel 'detached and distant instead' (*LH*, p.145).

As Ruth's experience suggests, one particular feature of the ideal that endures in the public consciousness is that self-sacrifice is a prerequisite of good mothering. This chapter seeks to understand why this belief has achieved such long-lasting resonance within the popular imagination, despite the challenge from the feminist movement and

certain postmodern ideas. Aspects of Foucault's work help to illuminate how writers, and hence their characters, have absorbed certain *truths* about motherhood. Foucault sought to discover how and why certain statements come to count as *true or false* in a given culture. He focused his enquiries on what he considered to be the bodies of knowledge in society, such as the disciplines of science or medicine: subjects that are prized for their objectivity and, therefore, considered most likely to produce truth. Foucault described the *truths* to arise from these bodies of knowledge as cultural discourse, asserting that 'we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth'.<sup>10</sup>

In *Discourse, Power and the Subject*, Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace observe that the critical discourse theory that emerged from continental (mainly French) philosophical traditions, of which Foucault was a part, was more about the history of ideas, rather than formal language systems.<sup>11</sup> Foucault's view is that the truth can *only* be interpretation and concludes that the discourses *produced* by any given historical period dictate how we write, speak or think about a given social object or practice.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, trans. by Colin Gordon and others (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), p.93.

<sup>11</sup> Alec McHoul, Alec and Wendy Grace, eds., *Discourse, Power and the Subject* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Foucault's challenge to language as a system of representation is part of a ground swell of activity which began in the first half of the twentieth century with the writings of Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Nietzsche. Heidegger developed the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation and ontological relativity, arguing that we can never satisfactorily know what a word means. Jacques Derrida was later to attempt to expose the language of Western metaphysics. These ideas were eventually gathered together under the term of postmodernism.

discourses don't merely represent 'the real', and in fact are part of its production [...] [therefore] which discourse is 'best' can't be decided by comparing it with any real object. The 'real' object simply isn't available for comparison outside its discursive construction. (McHoul and Grace, p.35)

Such an assertion obviously poses a challenge to our perception of reality: with language no longer accepted as representing the real, *the truth* is also revealed to be a discursive production.<sup>13</sup> For Foucault, 'discourse is not just a form of representation, it is *a material condition* (or set of conditions) which enables and constrains the socially productive imagination' (McHoul and Grace, p.34). Thus 'discourses for Foucault are structures of possibility and constraint'.<sup>14</sup>

### **Foucault, the Feminist Constructionist Methodology and Patriarchy**

Postmodernism's challenge to the objectivity of language clearly nourishes feminist ideological scepticism of discursive power: its contention that language is not a straightforward expression of reality reveals the interest that dominant social ideologies (such as a patriarchy) could have in controlling what will pass for the authoritative representations or universal myths of a given culture. In *The Content of*

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<sup>13</sup> White discusses Foucault's contention in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966); (London: Tavistock, 1970): 'the crucial change, or rather *mutation*, in the history of Western thought is that which "situated language within representation", charged words with the task of serving as transparent and unambiguous signs of the "things" that made up "reality" [...] hidden behind its status as simple "representation" of the real, this discourse was able to offer its own form as the obscure content of reality. And because discourse was thus privileged, reality inevitably took on the aspects of the linguistic mode in which it was presented to consciousness' (White, p.123). No specific page reference to *The Order of Things* is provided.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Talbot, *Language and Gender*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p.119.

*the Form*, White concludes that 'hidden behind its status as simple representation of the real [language] was able to offer its own form of the obscure content of reality' (White, p.123). Hence, in *The Future of Motherhood*, Jesse Bernard argues that motherhood can be understood as much 'more than the biological process of reproduction'.<sup>15</sup> She asserts that motherhood is an expression of a cultural expectation, that it is, in fact, 'an institution' (Bernard, p.vii). She proposes that 'motherhood consists of customs, traditions, conventions, beliefs, attitudes, mores, rules, laws, precepts, and the host of other rational and non-rational norms which deal with the care and rearing of children' (Bernard, p. vii).

Feminism (dovetailing with certain postmodern ideas) has created a methodology for studying the institution of the mother that endures.<sup>16</sup> In *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal* Dally argues that the 'eternal ideal' mother is a construct of patriarchy. She maintains that this 'ideal' fits in with social and political requirements which tend to penalise mothers at the expense of the rest of the family and society at large (Dally, p.10). Her argument derives from the social constructionist position within feminism. Jaggar, too, understands myth as 'a form of ideology that fulfils certain social and political functions' (Jaggar, p.190). Similarly, Forna's cultural critique of motherhood, *Mother of All Myths*, connects political and societal requirements with the promotion and persistence of the idealised depiction of motherhood, for 'the perfect mother [is] an instrument through which women's actions and choices

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<sup>15</sup> Jessie Bernard, *The Future of Motherhood* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), p.vii.

<sup>16</sup> It could be argued that feminism and the civil rights movement helped to give shape to certain ideas within postmodernism. Myths and universals were contested by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).



can be controlled and manipulated' (Forna, p.4). She contends that the ideal mother is the fiction of patriarchy:

For once let's turn the spotlight on those who presume to tell mothers what to do; to analyse *their* actions, unpick *their* motives and judge *their* handiwork, just as they have done not only to mothers but to all women because they have the potential to be mothers. Once held up to the light, the agendas behind many of our assumptions and beliefs about contemporary mothering are exposed, whether their roots are in popular culture, so-called scientific findings, historically accepted fact or the legacy of tradition. (Forna, p.3)

A relationship clearly exists between certain postmodern ideas and the feminist constructionist methodology of understanding gender.

However, there are also important differences.<sup>17</sup> Although Foucault was influential in establishing the concept of intellectual discourses as cultural statements, his work, ironically, is set against the methodology employed in much of the feminist constructionist research on motherhood it helped

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<sup>17</sup> Divisions between the feminist constructionist methodology and Foucault's exacting application of his theory are apparent in the work of Sandra Bartky, 'Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power' in *Feminism and Foucault: Paths of Resistance*, ed. by Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston, Massachusetts: North Eastern University Press, 1988), pp. 61-86. Bartky confronts Foucault's refusal to attribute power to a specific master group, such as a patriarchy, accusing him of 'gender blindness' (p.78). Bartky uses Foucault's idea of a 'disciplinary' society to account for the production of what she identifies as 'docile' female bodies: her focus is the mechanism 'that turns a female body into a feminine one' (p.78). She understands 'disciplinary power' as instrumental in coercing women to inscribe their bodies with 'femininity' – this power operates at a number of levels: through friends, doctors, beauty experts, images of women on film and television. Bartky asserts that a 'generalised male witness comes to structure woman's consciousness of herself as a bodily being' (p.78). This, she concludes, is the result of dominant male norms in society. McHoul and Grace take Bartky's conclusions to task in *Discourse, Power and the Subject*. They assert that Foucault's concept of power cannot reveal how a female body is turned into a feminine one: 'Foucault provides a way of situating, historically, forms of masculine and feminine consciousness. This includes, of course, a 'feminist' consciousness. [But] when Bartky poses the question as to why all women are not feminists, she neglects to investigate the far more puzzling issue inherent in the converse: how come, historically, there are any feminists at all?' (McHoul and Grace, p.75).

to inspire. For instance, Foucault would take issue with the perception of patriarchy critiqued by Fuss as presuming 'a totalising symbolic system that subjugates all women everywhere' (Fuss, p.251). Foucault opposes the notion of an ideology being conceived in terms of a group, for he rejects any attempt to restore what he considers to be 'a non-existent totality' to discourse (McHoul and Grace, p.42). His analysis maintains that the conditions which help to form a discourse are only available for examination at the moment of its creation.

Foucault describes discourse as a set of conditions which 'enables and constrains the socially productive imagination' (McHoul and Grace, p.34). Instead of conceiving of a patriarchy, for example, Foucault theorises countless statements, of dissimilar and distinct discourses which collectively form what he calls an 'episteme':

I would define the episteme retrospectively as the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won't say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p.197)

McHoul and Grace more usefully described the episteme as the 'space discourses inhabit, a non-unified, multiple and complex field of play' (McHoul and Grace, p.45).<sup>18</sup>

Hence Foucault does not believe in any 'essential or real structure underpin[ning] particular events or historical materials (such as myths or

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<sup>18</sup> See Michel Foucault, 'Politics and the Study of Discourse' (1968), trans. by Colin Gordon, *Ideology and Consciousness* 3 (1978), 7-26, p.10.

texts). The local and the particular, he argues, are always inserting their differences' (McHoul and Grace, p.2). His work also resists any attempt to utilise his theory of discourse as a universal entity (to refer to discourse in general) since the histories of discourses, for him, are quite distinct. Foucault's analysis of discourse, therefore, theorises a far more complicated picture of society than some feminists describe. For example, Kaplan uses discourse theory to help to explain changes to representations of the mother over time. She distinguishes three broad 'Master' mother discourses, which she describes as, 'the early modern, high-modernist and postmodern mothers' and extends her argument to link these depictions to three historical periods of transition that, she infers, helped to produce them:

These mother-related discourses may be described as first, Rousseauian discourses (produced along with the early modern mother institution); second, Darwinian/ Marxist/Freudian discourses (produced along with the First World War and high-modernist challenges to the family); and finally, recent, postmodern mother discourses (produced along with even more drastic challenges to the family through the electronic revolution and its impact on corporate capitalisms). (Kaplan, p.20)

Kaplan acknowledges the temptation to theorise 'the complex interrelationship between a cultural discourse and economic /social/technological change' (Kaplan, p.17).<sup>19</sup> However, attempting to

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<sup>19</sup> Kaplan attempts to sidestep this contradiction in her use of discourse theory, asserting that such an undertaking 'is beyond the scope of [her] book' (Kaplan, p.17). However, her claim is somewhat disingenuous as much of her argument (and that of many of her

'prove such links or show[ing] parallels' (Kaplan, p.17) in this way is an undertaking Foucault himself would vehemently oppose because his use of the term discourse is exacting.

Although Foucault's work is averse to any methodology that tries to substantiate links between the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother and, say, the discourses of the church or a twentieth-century patriarchy, his enduring contribution has been in 'revealing the historical specificity - the sheer fact that things could have been otherwise - of what we seem to know today with such certainty' (McHoul and Grace, p.33).<sup>20</sup> By exposing the truth as a function of what can be said, written or thought, Foucault's work challenges our existing perceptions of *essential* femininity as a consequence of biology. With *truth* no longer the same as fact, belief is questioned and the opportunity for opposition is created.<sup>21</sup> As White asserts, despite Foucault's

'histories' [being] as fraught with discontinuities, ruptures, gaps, and lacunae as his 'arguments' [...] it is not because he offers a coherent explanation or even interpretation of our current cultural incoherence but because he denies the authority that the distinction coherence/incoherence has

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contemporaries) revolves around 'positing a tentative link between changes in mother-institutions and mother-discourses ... [and] although I will not try to *prove* such links, I am satisfied to show parallels' (Kaplan, p.17). I cite Kaplan here not as a criticism, but to demonstrate the conflict that exists between Foucault's theory of discourse and how it has been utilised in mainstream social constructionist theory. My own thesis is equally guilty of attempting to 'posit links' between contemporary depictions of motherhood with certain discussions within the feminist movement and postmodern ideas. This conflict between Foucault's theory of discourse and its application also demonstrates the difficulties inherent in drawing any conclusions from Foucault's work as he conceived of it.

<sup>20</sup> 'Questions of Method: An Interview with Michel Foucault', *Ideology and Consciousness* 8 (1981), 3-14, p.6, cited in McHoul and Grace, p.33.

<sup>21</sup> However, Foucault contended that opposition is ineffectual as it gets absorbed and diluted by the mainstream.

enjoyed in Western thought since Plato. (White, p.108)

### **How Discourse Operates: The Taboo against Complaint**

Foucault maintained that discourse is 'whatever constrains - but also enables - writing, speaking and thinking within specific historical limits' (McHoul and Grace, p.31). As established in chapter one, what is considered *natural* and *normal* is significant to our understanding of motherhood and a desire to self-sacrifice for the sake of the child has long been considered as part of a mother's natural instinct - part of the package - or, as Rozsika Parker neatly expresses it, as 'a particular cultural expectation of the mothering experience' (Parker, R., p.44). In Gemmell's 'Tales of the Recent Past', a daughter who learns that she is pregnant is informed by her own mother that 'I will shed all my selfishness when I am a mother' (GA, p.21). Similarly, in Cusk's most recent novel, *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009), Claudia ruminates on what motherhood will mean for her:

Claudia remembers, when Lottie was born, the prospect of self-sacrifice coming into view like a landscape seen from an approaching train; she remembers the steady unfolding of it, a place she had never seen before in her life, and herself inescapably bound for it; and then after a while the realisation, pieced together from numerous clues, that this was where her mother had lived all along. (BV, p.59)

To some extent, it has been the fear of being labelled or, indeed, suspecting oneself to be abnormal, that has helped to keep the maternal

sacrifice narrative alive, even amongst those writers who wish to challenge it: no one wants to be suspected of being an unnatural, selfish, bad mother. Rozsika Parker comments on how such stringent cultural expectations can affect the experience of mothering for most women: 'how a mother feels about mothering – or the meanings it has for her is heavily determined by such cultural representations of motherhood' (Parker, R., p.2). Ruth in Gregory's *The Little House*, for example, doesn't enjoy mothering because motherhood for her means being 'trapped in the little house, waiting for Patrick to come home, seeing no one but a baby' (*LH*, p.124). Motherhood means the sacrifice of her life as she knew it.

In *Life After Birth*, Figes confirms that self-sacrifice remains an intrinsic feature of motherhood, whilst supporting the view expressed by turn of this century writers discussed in chapter one, that this defining aspect of new motherhood is less about instinct and more about '*learning* to manage the relentless self-sacrifice without feeling as if one's entire self has been sucked up by the vacuum cleaner' (p.viii). Figes also comments that 'what has surprised me is the tenacity of the taboos surrounding new motherhood' (p.vii) and argues that 'if we are not honest [...] then we perpetuate the myths and reinforce the taboo' (p.viii).

Writers and their characters who take issue with or attempt to deviate from a readiness to un-self, challenge the enduring cultural *norms* or *statements* identified by Foucault and thereby risk incurring society's displeasure. Interviewing Rachel Cusk, Maureen Freely concludes that,

despite this being the twenty-first century, to write about motherhood truthfully 'is still to plant a time-bomb'.<sup>22</sup>

The critical backlash experienced by some of the writers considered in this thesis is even more surprising given that their depictions of motherhood seldom take the form of vitriolic polemics.<sup>23</sup> Underlying many of these (sometimes humorous, often tragic) fictions and memoirs is, as Rozsika Parker observed in relation to the exchanges she witnessed between real-life mothers, the desire 'not so much [for] victory as a search for deeply needed reassurance' (Parker, R., p.1).

Post millennium motherhood fiction is typified by unsettling storylines and settings. The anxious nature of this literature suggests a degree of unease and confusion felt by the writers over the extent to which they are *right* to question the ideal of motherhood. By situating motherhood within stories of school massacres, terrorist attacks, and a murdered mother, Shriver, Cleave and Myerson are perhaps revealing their nervousness at challenging the dominant essentialist and sentimental discourses of motherhood in fiction: they fear falling victim themselves to the very discourses they seek to interrogate.

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<sup>22</sup> Maureen Freely, 'The Thursday Interview: Rachel Cusk – The Myth of Motherhood', *Independent*, 6 September 2001, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/rachel-cusk--the-myth-of-motherhood-668312.html>> [accessed 13 April 2011] hereafter Freely, 'The Myth of Motherhood'.

<sup>23</sup> *A Life's Work* presents a truthful, often humorous, always loving account of the difficulties of early motherhood. Cusk recalls one review of her memoir that asserted that 'if everyone were to read this book, the propagation of the human race would virtually cease [...] believe it or not, quite a few people enjoy motherhood, but in order to do so, it is important to grow up first'. Rachel Cusk, 'I was only being honest', *Guardian*, 21 March 2008, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/mar/21/biography.women.html>> [accessed 13 April 2011] hereafter Cusk, 'I was only being honest'.

Indeed, Cusk endured some merciless reviews following the publication of her memoir *A Life's Work*. Writing in Cusk's defence in her column for the *Independent*, Freely observed that 'critics [...] have not been content to condemn just the book. They want her to burn at the stake, too'.<sup>24</sup> These reviews denigrated Cusk both as an author and as a mother. The reception to Cusk's account of her own experience of motherhood serves as an apt demonstration of Foucault's interpretation of the Catholic concept of the confessional. Foucault highlights the regulatory rather than the reassuring nature of the confessional. He extends his notion of the confessional further to include 'interrogations, interviews, conversations, consultations, and even *autobiographical narratives* [my italics]', which would include Cusk's (McHoul and Grace, p.80). Foucault asserts that wherever 'the confessional' is employed, it is a ritual that always unfolds within a power relationship. He observes that whether one confesses to a real or imaginary partner, the interlocutor becomes 'the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile' (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p.62).<sup>25</sup>

Cusk was judged harshly and publically punished. The virulence of the reviews on *A Life's Work* left her 'gasping':

On and on it went, back and forth. I was accused of child hating, of post-natal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness [...] the telephone rang and rang. I was invited on to the

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<sup>24</sup> Freely, 'The Myth of Motherhood'.

<sup>25</sup> Cited by McHoul and Grace, p.80.



Today programme to defend myself. I was invited on the Nicky Campbell programme to defend myself. I was cited everywhere as having said the unsayable.<sup>26</sup>

Subject to such unanticipated criticism, Cusk feels compelled to defend herself:

I can understand someone saying they don't agree with my response to motherhood. But in the bad reviews they said, 'look at her, she went and climbed a mountain when she was pregnant, she confines her child to the kitchen like an animal, what kind of mother does that?' They've said, 'you're a bad mother, we disown you, busy mothers won't have time to read this'. It is as if the organism of good mothers has produced an antibody to reject me. It has made me think I can go back to my book and say I was right to find the culture of motherhood completely suffocating.<sup>27</sup>

The criticisms levelled against Cusk principally highlight her prioritising herself over her child: for instance, she skis when she should be considering the well-being of her unborn foetus; she wallows in self-pity when she should be devoting her energies to the care of the child. As an author, Cusk suffers the same vilification that has befallen the fictional mothers of the past who have refused to be self-sacrificing. Cusk considers Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*'s failure as a mother and concludes that 'she is the essence of a bad mother' because she is a 'woman who persists in wanting to be the centre of attention' (*ALW*, p.88).

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<sup>26</sup> Cusk, 'I was only being honest'.

<sup>27</sup> Freely, 'The Myth of Motherhood'.

Insistence on self has come to define the bad mother so much so that any indication of self-regard is frowned upon. Twenty-first century mothers confront the same cultural expectation - the *giving of oneself* - as their nineteenth-century counterparts. Kaplan's contention, made in 1992, that 'mothering is the last traditional female role, historically to be questioned' appears to hold true today (Kaplan, p.16). It could be argued that the taboo against complaint has not diminished with the passage of time because the reasons for its existence have remained largely unchanged. Whether we continue to live in a patriarchy or not, humanity continues to need children and culturally women remain responsible for their care and for providing that stable upbringing.

### **Foucault and the Trope of the Panopticon**

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault demonstrates how easily a system of self-regulation can be imposed without recourse to physical force and violence.<sup>28</sup> Foucault focuses on the use of the Panopticon in prisons and its role in maintaining order, to illustrate his contention. The Panopticon is a tower designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1785. Situated at the centre of prison life, its presence alone implies constant surveillance and this encourages the prisoners to self-regulate: 'hence the major effect of the panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.201).

The Panopticon, therefore, encourages compliance and docility in the

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (1975), trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House; London: Allen Lane, 1977).

population it serves just by being there: Bentham himself described the Panopticon as a 'new mode of obtaining power over the mind, in a quantity hitherto without example'.<sup>29</sup>

Foucault concurred with Bentham, asserting that the Panopticon represents 'the perfection of power' in that its presence 'should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary' (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.201). There is an obvious correlation to be made here between how taboo functions in society and the role of the Panopticon: both encourage self-governance through the fear of unspecified repercussions for those who transgress.<sup>30</sup> The feminist movement famously posited as long ago as the 1960s that 'the attitudes of the oppressor enter the minds of the oppressed so that women become the means of their own oppression'.<sup>31</sup> In *Inventing Motherhood*, Dally relates this well-known feminist argument to motherhood in particular: 'nowhere is this [self governance] seen more clearly than in mothers of the twentieth century' (Dally, p.11). In 1998, Forna finds that 'the rhetoric of motherhood [has] remained unchallenged for so long' and concludes that the 'myth of the perfect mother' has become woven into the fabric of our consciousnesses' (Forna, p.3).

Pearson provides a fictional example of the mother's collusion in self-regulation in *How She Does It* in two chapters entitled the 'Court of Motherhood'. Thanks to feminism, Kate Reddy's right to work has been

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<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Bentham, 'Panopticon', in *The Panopticon Writings*, ed. by Miran Bozovic, (London: Verso, 1995) pp. 29-95.

<sup>30</sup> Literature has often used the concept of the Panopticon as a trope, see Penelope Mortimer's *The Pumpkin Eater* (1964); Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) and the concept of Big Brother in George Orwell's *1984* (1949).

<sup>31</sup> See Sandra Bartky, 'On Psychological Oppression', *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. by Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp.105-114, (p.105).

legally established. However, on a personal level Kate is plagued by feelings of guilt for not looking after her own children. Rozsika Parker considers guilt as part of her discussion of ambivalence, asserting that 'for a mother, ambivalence spells the dissolution of her particular version of the maternal ideal – a letting go of fantasies of omnipotence and perfectibility, with all the guilt they entail' (Parker, R., p.40). Kate fails to 'let go' of her image of the ideal mother yet she feels herself incapable of the level of self-sacrifice she believes it demands of her. On occasion, she attempts to stand her ground, questioning the mythic figure's unbending requirements: 'what is ideal? Mummy staying at home and laying down her life for small feet to walk over. Would you do that? Could I do that?' (*HSD*, p.90). As a consequence of her rebellion, she finds herself called to appear before 'The Court of Motherhood'. This court of motherhood is convened by her sub-conscious. That the novel dedicates two chapters to the 'Court' indicates the degree of influence the internalised discourse of the self-sacrificing mother has over Kate's mothering. Kate accuses herself of 'being a working mother who overcompensates with material things for not being at home with her children' (*HSD*, p.62) and 'leaving a sick child in London while [she] flew on business to the United States of America' (*HSD*, p.171).<sup>32</sup>

Taboo also enforces self-regulation by delineating what is forbidden in society and ensures that the unmentionable remains unmentioned and the unthinkable unthought. It dictates how we write,

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<sup>32</sup> Guilt is a key mechanism in the self-regulation of mothers. Following critical reviews of *A Life's Work* which focused more on Cusk as a mother than a writer, she returned home to her children and was 'instantly overcome by powerful feelings of guilt and shame'. Cusk, 'I was only being honest'.

speak or think about motherhood. Figes was inspired to write *Life after Birth* in response to what she considered to be 'a conspiracy of silence surrounding the transition to motherhood' (Figes, p.3) whilst Cusk similarly observes a 'taboo against complaint' operating amongst mothers (ALW, p.136). When Eva in *Kevin* feels compelled to tell her husband of her doubts concerning her pregnancy, his condemnation is immediate and unforgiving: "don't you ever say that" you said, your face beet-red. "It's too late for second thoughts. Never, ever tell me that you regret your own kid" (K, p.64). Franklin's vociferous anger demonstrates the strength with which established truths about motherhood are defended and silences Eva, who is careful not to transgress in such a way again. She is reduced to imagining her husband's comforting words on the birth of Kevin because she dare not tell him of her disappointment. Eva aptly files these feelings away under 'thought crimes' (K, p.203).

Franklin's prohibition on Eva expressing her ambivalence toward Kevin seals mother and son in a destructive relationship. Franklin does not permit Eva to voice any negative feelings or concerns about Kevin, insisting that Kevin is a normal, 'happy, healthy boy' (K, p.199), and as a consequence of this prohibition their son's disturbed behaviour goes unchecked. Franklin's taboo against complaint and his critical judgement of Eva's mothering equally constrains Eva from recognising how her own feelings towards Kevin may have contributed to her son's behaviour. For example, Eva considers Kevin's predilection for wearing nappies long into his infancy as yet another attempt on his part at 'tyrannising [her] life' (K, p.176). It is Kevin's school teacher who has to point out to Eva that "this

kind of *nonconforming behaviour* was sometimes *a cry for help*" (K, p.177). Eva is at a loss to understand why Kevin appears to want to hold onto the emblems of babyhood in such a way, refusing to be toilet trained and preferring to wear tiny clothes. Eva muses dismissively 'there was more than a suggestion of *Peter Pan* about the style – a refusal to grow up – though I am confused why he would cling so to being a kid when throughout his childhood he seemed so lost in it' (K, p.170). Eva sadly misses the point of her son's behaviour: that Kevin and Peter Pan are both motherless boys desperately searching for someone to love and nurture them.

Rozsika Parker asserts that by achieving 'manageable maternal ambivalence [...] empathy [can] coexist with enmity' (Parker, R., p.xii). Eva's mothering of Kevin has been so prescribed by her husband that she feels only resentment for her son. She is overly concerned with playing motherhood by the rules of the 'ideal' and this inhibits Eva from developing any real empathy for Kevin. In a letter to Franklin she 'begs him' to understand

just how hard I was trying to be a good mother. But trying to be a good mother may be as distant as trying to have a good time is from truly having one. Distrusting my every instinct from the moment he was laid on my breast, I'd followed a devout regime of hugging my little boy an average of three times a day, admiring something he did or said at least twice, and reciting *I love you, Kiddo* or *you know your daddy and I love you very much* with the predictable uniformity of liturgical professions of faith. But too strictly observed, most sacraments grow hollow. Moreover, for six solid years I'd put my every

utterance on the five second delay of call-in radio shows, just to make sure I didn't broadcast anything obscene, slanderous or contrary to company policy. The vigilance came at a cost. It made me remote, halting, and awkward. (K, p.195)

Franklin expresses the cultural expectation of how a mother should feel and behave. Mothers should love their children at first sight; they should love them unconditionally; and they should be prepared to sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of their child. Indeed, the very title of the book *We Need to Talk about Kevin* illustrates the degree to which certain conversations are forbidden in culture and the extent to which the conversation Franklin refuses to have with Eva is deemed responsible for the novel's murderous conclusion, in the style of the real-life Columbine massacre.<sup>33</sup> Reflecting on maternal ambivalence Rozsika Parker observes that 'our culture plays a part in [...] virtually prohibiting the kind of full discussion and exploration that would reveal the hidden contribution to creative mothering that maternal ambivalence can make' (Parker, R., p.1).

In turn of this century fiction characters who choose to challenge the *truths* of established discourse are often denigrated as *unnatural* and ostracised. Foucault contends that to break existing taboos is to risk being defined by society as Other, to be understood in terms of being either bad or insane.<sup>34</sup> This type of definition justifies the disciplining of

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<sup>33</sup> On 20 April 1999, two senior students (Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris) at Columbine High School, Columbine, Colorado, USA, killed 12 fellow students and a teacher and injured a further 21 students <[http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-04-13-columbine-myths\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-04-13-columbine-myths_N.htm)> [accessed 29 April 2011]

<sup>34</sup> In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault posits the notion of the Other against which he maintains society's Same/Different continuum is placed. Foucault contends that the intention behind the disciplines' preoccupation with norms was to create regularity in

those who 'deviate from the norm, either by education, incarceration or some other form of moral engineering' (White, p.129). This fate is reserved for Ruth in Gregory's *The Little House*. Confused and depressed by early motherhood, Ruth inadvertently lets slip to her doctor some of her frustration at being woken throughout the night by her baby: "and there are times when I could just *murder* him!" She clapped her hand to her mouth and looked aghast. "I didn't mean that. I didn't mean to say that. I'd never hurt him. Never!" (LH, p.102). Ruth's immediate retraction reveals that she knows she has transgressed and her anxiety is not misplaced. This conversation is the catalyst for a series of events that conclude with Ruth being removed from the family home and hospitalised for depression. Despite having no intention of hurting her son, Ruth's unguarded conversation enables her mother-in-law, Elizabeth, to turn her husband Patrick against her: "the authorities have tremendous powers [...] if they think that Ruth has endangered Thomas, they can take him right away from us all and we might never see him again. Once you ask them in, you give them the power to do what they want" (LH, p.137).

Similarly, Shriver's *Kevin* demonstrates the potentially serious repercussions for those mothers who choose to challenge what is

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society. By defining what is normal, one can chart one's own Same/Difference and modify accordingly. The Other sits outside of the conformity of the Same/Different range of behaviours/physical attributes and is, therefore, inscribed within the discourses of madness, sickness, criminality and sexuality and must be 'shut away', either literally or figuratively. (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p.xxiv). White categorises Foucault's work using this continuum. He asserts that *The Order of Things* is a 'history of the same – of that which, for a given culture is both dispersed and related, therefore to be distinguished by kinds and to be collected together into identities. *Surveiller et Punir* and *La Volonté de Savoir* [...] are histories of "the Other", that which is "shut away" and hidden "in order to reduce its Otherness" that which is regarded as the abnormal [Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p.xxiv]', (White, p.125).



considered to be *ideal* practice. Like Pearson's Kate (who constructs her own internal judge and jury), Eva is also summoned before a Court to defend her mothering. But this court is not a figment of Eva's imagination: it is the result of a civil action brought by the mother of one of Kevin's teenage victims (in an attempt to force Eva to admit that her *unnatural, unsacrificial* attitude toward Kevin was a contributory factor in his murder spree). Although Eva has not committed any crime herself, this private prosecution attempts to legislate against her, not because it has evidence of parental negligence or cruelty, but because in Kevin's State trial Eva refused to 'protest Kevin's innocence in the face of mountainous evidence to the contrary' (K, p.399). Her trial is an ironic comment on the discourse of the self-sacrificing, ideal mother as it suggests that Eva can be prosecuted because her refusal *as a mother* to protect a mass murderer is considered culturally suspect. Eva, herself, concludes that her refusal to demonstrate unconditional love by sacrificing her own judgement and integrity has propelled her into the Courts:

We don't like mothers who don't like their own sons [...] I had broken the most primitive of rules, profaned the most sacred of ties [...] had I railed against his 'tormentors' for having driven him to it, had I insisted that after taking Prozac 'he was a completely different boy' – well, I guarantee you that Mary Woolford and that defence fund she raised through the Internet would have been forced to pay me court costs to the final dime. Instead, my demeanour was repeatedly described in the papers as 'defiant', while my disagreeable characterisations of my own flesh and blood were submitted

no comment [*sic*] to hang me out to dry. (K, p.399)

### **An Unholy Trinity: the Discourses of the Ideal Mother, the Angel and the Virgin**

The feminist constructionist approach to understanding the role of the mother argues that the expectation to un-self has remained constant over time because many of our contemporary ideas of mothering date back to a maternal archetype left over from the nineteenth century, as depicted in Patmore's poem 'The Angel in the House' (1854).<sup>35</sup> Virginia Woolf famously took exception to Patmore's 'phantom' in 'Professions for Women' describing this angel as the embodiment of self-sacrifice:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathise always with the minds and the wishes of others.<sup>36</sup>

Written in 1982, Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* engages with the taboo of selfishness in women and similarly identifies 'The Angel in the House' – that nineteenth century icon of feminine goodness immortalised by the poet Coventry Patmore as [depicting] the woman who acts and speaks only for

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<sup>35</sup> Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in The House* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854).

<sup>36</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women' (1931), in *Virginia Woolf*, by Monique Nathan (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p.168.

others'.<sup>37</sup> Gilligan wrote *In a Different Voice* in response to the U.S. Supreme Court Decision in *Roe vs. Wade* to make abortion legally available in America. She observes that in the aftermath of this decision, many women were openly questioning the morality of the angel in the house, identifying the 'internal or internalised voice [that] told a woman that it would be selfish to bring her voice into relationships' (Gilligan, p.ix). 'Women often sensed that it would be dangerous to say or even to know what they wanted or thought [...] that it would be better to appear "selfless", to give up their voices and keep the peace' (Gilligan, p.x). Gilligan argues that there was a form of collective realisation that 'by restricting their voices, many women are unwittingly perpetuating a male-voiced civilisation and an order of living that is founded on the disconnection from women' (Gilligan, p.x). Writing 'A Letter to Readers' (1993) - which forms the preface to a later edition of her book - she claims to have witnessed a 'momentous' point in history, 'releasing women's voices and making it possible to hear what women know. It was this choice to speak that interested me' (Gilligan, p.x).

Although *Kevin* is written some 150 years after Patmore's poem (and despite Gilligan's optimism in 1993), Shriver's heroine Eva in *Kevin* is still not allowed to use her 'voice' to 'talk about Kevin': and she is still battling against the patriarchal norm of selfless motherhood. This apparent stasis in cultural expectations of the voiceless mother can also be witnessed in the critical reaction to Cusk's memoir. Her work was shouted down (as opposed to legitimately critiqued) by some reviewers.

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<sup>37</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (1982; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.x.

Further highlighting the apparently timeless nature of this expectation of selflessness, Eva turns to another of Woolf's essays, 'A Room of One's Own' (1929), to help make her argument to her son for retaining some sense of herself in motherhood:

I was burbling to Kevin, something all very Virginia Woolf like, everyone needs a room of their own. You know you have your room? Well, this is mommer's room. And everyone likes to make their room special. Mommer's been to lots of different places, and all these maps remind me of the trips I've taken. (*K*, p.155)<sup>38</sup>

Eva's desperate need for a study is her attempt to combat feelings of a loss of identity, engendered by motherhood: 'I craved some physical emblem of my earlier self if only to remind me I had deserted that life through choice' (*K*, p.154). The idea of maternal sacrifice has endured because, as Cusk suggests, it still has the power to capture women in its 'mythic snare' (*ALW*, p.7); and as Woolf observed of the angel in the house, her 'fictitious nature was of great assistance to her' (Nathan, p.168). Woolf recognises the danger posed by myth, observing that 'it is far harder to kill a phantom than it is a reality' (Nathan, p.168). She recognises the angel's capacity to deprive her of her right to self, and concludes that, 'had I not have killed her she would have killed me' (Nathan, p.168). In 2003, Shriver invokes the self-sacrificing angel with

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<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, the desire for a room of one's own is seen as an illustration of David Lovatt's selfishness in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988): "it's important", said David, fierce; "everyone should have a room" (*FC*, p.31). Lessing's novel is critical of the Lovatt family's 'demand on life' and David's desire for a room of one's own is depicted as part of the 'me' culture of the selfish 1960s.

her reference to Woolf, suggesting that this spectre continues to haunt the minds of men, women and children alike as the *ideal* for motherhood.<sup>39</sup>

Selflessness is a unique condition to impose on a human relationship: such high expectations are usually reserved for those following a religious vocation. The level of self-abnegation expected of mothers demonstrates the degree to which the religious authorities still influence our understanding of motherhood, with the Virgin Mary being the mother archetype throughout the generations. Forna asserts that

the best-known image of the ideal mother has been with us for centuries in the form of the Madonna and Child, the most compelling depiction of pale, calm, benevolent motherhood [...] although Christianity did not, on its own invent the motherhood myth, the Church has been highly efficient in marketing the maternal ideal. (Forna, p.9)

Many feminists have engaged with exposing the Madonna myth. Indeed, this premise has formed the basis for innumerable feminist critiques of motherhood over the last forty years.<sup>40</sup> Although much of this research was undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s, Rozsika Parker writes as

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<sup>39</sup> As an aside, although un-selfing is the prescribed route for mothers, it is worth noting that it is complicit portraits that are most often forgotten, perhaps because they present portraits similar to Simpson's Dorrie: that of 'miserable and long suffering [...] boring saint[s]' (HY, p.55). Whereas, portraits of bad mothers in literature are much easier to recall as they tend to depict lively, vivid, sexually curious female characters, who challenge society's taboos by insisting on their right to happiness, despite being mothers. Representations of resisting and transgressive mothers are discussed in chapters three and four.

<sup>40</sup> Most feminist exposés comment on the influence of religious ideology over the perceptions of the perfect mother. See Melissa Benn, *Madonna and Child: Toward a New Politics of Motherhood* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998) and E.V. Welldon, *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealisation and Denigration of Motherhood* (London: Free Association Books, 1988).

recently as 2005 that, 'the Madonna image of maternity has become a cliché. But though we may mock it, demystify it, reframe it, turn our backs on it, deconstruct it, we cannot dismiss it. It is too deeply embedded in our psycho-cultural life to be eradicated' (Parker, R., p.35).

This thesis engages with the myth of the selfless ideal mother because the image remains dominant in current fiction. However, it is likely that the prevalence of religious imagery and the Madonna in recent texts implies rather more than a complicit acceptance of the Virgin Mary as the ideal for mothering. These texts demonstrate an awareness of the image of the Madonna as part of the construction of a persecutory ideal. With the death of her son, the mother in Cleave's *Incendiary* castigates herself by comparing herself to 'some sort of saint who just sewed fluffy toys and waited up for her husband. I wish I was a saint because it was what my boy deserved but it wasn't what he got. I wasn't a perfect wife and mum in fact I wasn't even an average one' (*I*, p.12). Similarly, Simpson highlights the religious when articulating Dorrie's despair at the self-sacrificing nature of the ideal in 'Hey Yeah Right Get A Life'. Dorrie weeps over her 'own egotism like a novice nun, for goodness sake, except it was for the family instead of God. But still it was necessary, selflessness, for a while' (*HY*, p.57).<sup>41</sup> Dorrie also responds desperately to her husband's accusation of becoming 'miserable and long suffering' as a mother, with 'you think I've just turned into a boring saint. But I'm

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<sup>41</sup> In *The Bradshaw Variations* even Tonie's husband Thomas becomes invested with saintly qualities when he takes over the care of their daughter Alexa: 'every time she looked at Thomas he had water running from the corner of his eyes like, like a saint in a religious painting' (*BV*, p.18).

still here' (HY, p.55).<sup>42</sup> In *How She Does It*, Pearson demonstrates her frustration with the redundancy of religious teachings in supporting Kate in her endeavours to self-sacrifice. Kate looks to Bellini's portrait of the Madonna for an insight into how to be a good mother: 'I used to like to sit in front of that Bellini Madonna [...]. I'd always thought it was serenity in her eyes. Now, I only see exhaustion and mild puzzlement' (HSD, p.279).

Leaving aside the spiritual redundancy of the image of the Virgin Mary for some millennium writers, from a practical point of view the life of a first-century Jewish mother bears little resemblance to those lived by women today. Ruth concludes in *The Little House* that mothers now have fulfilling lives prior to motherhood that they don't wish to sacrifice. Ruth fears her forthcoming child, unlike her husband Patrick, because 'of course he would be happy – it would not be Patrick whose life would totally change. It would not be Patrick who would leave the work he loved and who would now never travel' (LH, p.46). These characters have careers, vote, take lovers, divorce and own property.<sup>43</sup> In Myerson's novel *Something*, the characters of Tess and Lennie are examples of dynamic, modern women: both work and both have husbands who help with childcare. Lennie is 'thirtyish, independent [...] with her own business'. She is 'unimpressed' by men and is 'tough', 'creative' and

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<sup>42</sup> Dorrie's character is written in opposition to popular culture's notion of the 'Yummy Mummy': a term used to describe self-centered, well-groomed, pampered, stay-at-home mothers who spend their days with their designer-clad babies alternating between the gym and pavement cafés. The term has also entered the fiction of the period, with Cleave's novel *Incendiary* making reference to the 'yummie mummies pushing their babies in 3 wheel buggies' (I, p.61).

<sup>43</sup> Writing in the 1990s, Forster compares her life to that of her mother's in *Hidden Lives*. 'What I did understand, though, was that my mother's life seemed one of complete self-abnegation. And I was beginning to understand something else: I wasn't going to be like her' (Forster, p.150).

'funny' (*SMH*, p.321). Yet, as a mother, Lennie appears compelled to behave contrary to her character. She takes on certain characteristics of the self-sacrificing ideal. She understands the need for conformity in motherhood, as her friend Tess acknowledges: 'Lennie is good – better than me – at knowing when to shut up' (*SMH*, p.14). As a mother, Lennie becomes a member of the PTA and joins other committees in the village.

Despite a thriving pottery business, Lennie's career comes a poor second to her family. Her internalised perception of how to be a good mother induces Lennie into behaving in much the same way her predecessors would have done under a more stringent form of patriarchy. When Lennie is murdered by an unidentified assailant in the village square following an evening PTA meeting, her degree of conformity leads the town's people to be aghast, for she was 'not the type to have something happen. She has everything going for her. Beauty, talent, kindness. She even sometimes goes to church' (*SMH*, p.5). Lennie was 'so normal' (*SMH*, p.97), even her colouring, her 'whiteness' (*SMH*, p.21) implies goodness, her pallor conferring on her a saintly hew. But Lennie's one, small, subversive act, that of sneaking the occasional cigarette, reveals how unachievable and destructive aspiring to the saintly ideal can be. Lennie's cigarette lighter sports a picture of 'the Virgin Mary' and when she lights her cigarette, 'the Virgin Mary's head bursts into flames' (*SMH*, p.40).

Myerson's plot suggests that the physical and emotional cost of this degree of self-abnegation in motherhood is too high for the twenty-first century mother. Lennie's murderer is not revealed over the course of



the novel, and as the story progresses it becomes apparent that the whodunit aspect of the story is incidental to Myerson's narrative. The novel infers that adherence to the narrative of maternal sacrifice itself is responsible for Lennie's tragic demise. Her style of motherhood takes the heart out of her, literally, as well as figuratively, a fact which Tess reveals as she attempts to come to terms with the brutal nature of her friend's murder: 'all I need to know is her heart was not still beating when her attacker moved back in to cut it out' (*SMH*, p.2).

Myerson's construction of Lennie discreetly draws attention to the incompatible demands placed on women. Twenty-first-century women are encouraged to consider themselves as equal to men and to aspire to careers and worldly success. Yet as mothers, women are often forced to relinquish their independence for the role of care-giver. Even for those women who retain their career in full or in part, their wants and needs become secondary to those of their families, including, often, those of the husband. Myerson's indistinct portrayal of Lennie is intentional since it illustrates how her identity as an individual has been eroded by her function as a mother:

When Alex tries to give the police a physical description of Lennie, he gets confused. He goes almost crazy trying to think what she had on ... when she screamed at Max about the state of his room, or kicked the washing machine door shut and swore because it hurt her foot, or made the boys' tea in a hurry and upset Connor by slightly burning the frilled edges of his second fried egg. He knows she did these things, but he can't see her doing them. (*SMH*, p.17)

Myerson continues her commentary on motherhood by making Lennie both central to the plot (who killed Lennie? is ostensibly the narrative drive of the novel), whilst her lack of definition as a character makes her incidental to it. Lennie's diminished self describes many women's experiences of motherhood: one's own story disappears, whilst becoming an intrinsic part of other people's. At the end of Myerson's story, Lennie is simply replaced as mother and wife by Ellie, a substitution which makes Tess smile since she is 'far more like Lennie than anyone will admit' (*SMH*, p.321). Myerson's conclusion illustrates that society continues to permit motherhood to obliterate a woman's sense of self and to reduce her to a list of functions (which, in turn, renders her replaceable). Lennie has played by the rules, sacrificing her self to be a supportive wife and mother. The reader is told that she 'would never leave' her family (*SMH*, p.21), but despite her sacrifices and willingness to conform, she does not receive the promised reward of a fulfilling family life.

In Lennie's fate, Myerson appears to be suggesting that motherhood can rip the heart out of a woman. Lennie's killer is never caught, because her killer is society, her friends and loved ones. To this end, most of the characters in the novel are put forward as suspects at some point in the narrative. Alex, Lennie's husband, is near the car park on the night of her murder, as he has been enjoying a clandestine meeting with Tess. Tess, therefore, is also a suspect and we are informed that she has the know-how to extract a heart: 'I cut up plenty when I was training' (*SMH*, p.64). However, Myerson's sub-text

implicates something as mundane as the neglect of a feckless husband, the natural self-interest of children and a physical workload that is sometimes too onerous to bear, as Lennie's most likely assailant.

### **Battling a Rival Consciousness**

Post millennium literature suggests that the relationship between mother and child is affected by the demand for selflessness on the part of the mother. The recent depictions of motherhood discussed here centre on this either/or dilemma. These texts reflect the cultural assumption that if the mother is happy and fulfilled outside of the home, her child must have suffered (as the mother's happiness means she has focussed on herself, rather than on her child's needs). In *Kevin*, Eva's husband attempts to restrain his wife from dancing and enjoying the occasional glass of wine for the sake of the unborn child she is carrying. Eva feels resentment at what she perceives as petty and draconian restrictions, and her relationship with her unborn child becomes an unfortunate casualty of her pique at her husband's expectations of her. Eva nicknames the foetus Little Lord Fauntleroy and understands its existence in terms of a rival to her own happiness: 'boy, was I already sick of having the *well-being of a whole other person* held over my head. My well-being, apparently, now counts for beans' (*K*, p.64). It is also interesting to note that today's medical discourses are more insistent on privileging the child's rights over the mother's, by contrast with the 1960s when the baby was expected to fit into the mother's life. Eva comments on this marked change in approach to parenting to Franklin: "I mean that when I was a kid, parents

called the shots. Now I'm a parent, kids call the shots. So we get fucked coming and going" (K, p.107). Such *child-led* or *child-focused* parenting can be damaging to the mother-child relationship, as illustrated by the destructive relationship between Eva and Kevin.

In Simpson's 'Hey Yeah Right Get A Life', Dorrie is overwhelmed by the demands of her three children, whom she feels 'levied such a fantastic rate of slavish fealty that they left her gasping for air' (HY, p.30). She struggles in particular with her son Martin: 'for his first five years he had been full of complaints, fault finding and irritability. He still flew into towering rages and hit her and screamed until he was pink or blue in the face, often several times a day' (HY, p.28). In need of assistance, she consults the doctor about it: "all behaviour is learned behaviour", said the doctor reprovingly. "Never shout back or you'll just encourage him" (HY, p.28). His advice induces a form of selfless passivity in Dorrie, who concludes that 'you just had to take it, and wait for time to pass. It could take years. It did' (HY, p.28). Dorrie relinquishes her job to care full-time for her family because she 'can't see how family would work if I let myself start wanting things again' (HY, p.39). Her choice of total abnegation of self is met with social and cultural approval: 'according to the nursery school queue, that meant she was a good mother. She did nothing for herself. She was a vanity-free zone' (HY, p.39).

In *A Life's Work* Cusk understands her daughter in terms of 'a rival consciousness' (p.133):

To be a mother I must leave the telephone unanswered,  
work undone, arrangements unmet. To be myself I must

let the baby cry, must forestall her hunger or leave her for evenings out, I must forget her in order to think of other things. To succeed in being one means to fail at being the other. (*ALW*, p.57)

Cusk contends that in motherhood one's life becomes 'irretrievably mired in conflict, or caught in some mythic snare in which you will perpetually, vainly struggle' (*ALW*, p.7). Simpson's Dorrie is similarly snared. When contemplating women's magazines in the newsagent's window, she knows that the magazines 'with words like juggle and struggle across their covers [were] for her and her like' (*HY*, p.21). Pearson also concurs with this view of the conflicting demands of children or self, opening *How She Does It* with the Concise Oxford Dictionary's definition of the verb to 'juggle':

**1** Perform feats of dexterity, esp. by tossing objects in the air and catching them, keeping several in the air at the same time. **2** Continue to deal with (several activities) at once, esp. with ingenuity. **3** deceive or cheat. (*HSD*, preface)

These characters are consistently battling an apparent 'necessity – to give everything, to throw [themselves] on the bonfire', as Simpson suggests (*HY*, p.21).<sup>44</sup> The persistence of the idea that self-sacrifice is an intrinsic part of good mothering suggests, as Kaplan observes, that there

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<sup>44</sup> The image links to the Hindu funeral practice of Sati, also called suttee, in which a recently widowed woman would either voluntarily or by use of force and coercion immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Simpson's reference to this practice evokes the ultimate sacrifice demanded by patriarchy. Shriver also refers to this practice in *Kevin*: 'you were just desperate to throw yourself into this parenting business, weren't you? To plunge from a cliff, to pitch yourself on a pyre' (*K*, p.72).

is an enduring 'cultural assumption that there is only one, universal way in which to mother' (Kaplan, p.200). To varying degrees, the fiction of the millennium is contesting this assumption, with depictions of motherhood that illustrate how damaging such a universal prescription can be to both mother and child.

### **Asserting Her Right to Self: The Working Mother**

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the focus on self-negation in motherhood intensified because so many mothers now routinely work whilst raising their families. Rozsika Parker refers to the work of Jessica Benjamin, who has suggested that, as a reaction to recent historical changes in modes of mothering (for example mothers working), Western culture is under the sway of a sentimental idealisation of motherhood: the ideal being, in Benjamin's words, 'an all giving, self contained haven'.<sup>45</sup> Benjamin asserts that the ideal's dominance 'has impeded change in relation to the provision of better day care, medical care, maternity leave and flexible working times, which all are so necessary for the actual conditions of mothering – and unnecessary for the ever-present, omniscient ideal' (Benjamin, p.211). Hence political/social structures are able to limit their support for mothers at work because of the maternal self-sacrifice narrative: its potential moral implications justifying a lack of support. The recent Children's Society report on UK parenting *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* (2009), for example, identifies adult selfishness as the primary cause of academic

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<sup>45</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (London: Virago, 1990), p.211.

under-achievement, lack of self-esteem, behavioural difficulties, anxiety and depression in Britain's young people. Working mothers and family breakdown are cited as manifestations of parental selfishness.<sup>46</sup> The vigour of such an anti-working mother discourse accounts for the fact that the conflict that exists between work and family for mothers is a recurring theme in turn of this century texts. Forna argues that, particularly during periods of change in history, the myth of the ideal mother is promoted to manipulate women back into acquiescing to a more traditional style of mothering:

Despite the changes in the working and family lives of millions of women, despite the talk of an age of 'post-feminism', attitudes towards mothers are stuck in the dark ages [...]. This vision of idealised motherhood still permeates every aspect of life from the division of labour at home, to our employment laws, policies and legal rulings, and drips down continually through popular culture, books, television, films and newspapers. (Forna, p.4)

Those characters who are not prepared to relinquish their careers for the sake of their children do so in the glare of societal disapproval. Pearson's

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<sup>46</sup> One of the report's authors, Professor Jonathan Bradshaw from York University, associates growing up in what he believes is a 'dog-eat-dog' society as a contributory factor in childhood unhappiness. The Children's Commissioner for England, Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green, commenting on the report's findings said: 'we are turning out a generation of young people who are unhappy, unhealthy, engaging in risky behaviour, who have poor relationships with their family and their peers, who have low expectations and don't feel safe'. *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* (2009) commissioned by the Children's Society. Shriver's Kevin and Cleave's *Incendiary* depict a 'dog-eat-dog' society. In *Incendiary*, for example, when the mother and Jasper Black try to leak the story to the press that the Government knew in advance of the May Day bombings, they are betrayed by Black's pregnant girlfriend Petra: "'I'll tell you what's happened. The paper's sold out to the Government and Petra's sold out to the paper. Now the Government has your videotape and the paper has first dibs on the next big Downing Street leak. God knows what deal Petra has cut for herself. I'm guessing she'll come back from maternity leave as Deputy Editor'" (I, p.299).

Kate in *How She Does It* understands 'that the world of women was divided in two: there were proper mothers, self-sacrificing bakers of apple pies and well-scrubbed invigilators of the twin-tub, and there were the other sort' (*HSD*, p. 5). Kate is 'the other sort' who goes to work: the sort whose in-laws hope that she 'could work a bit less in the coming twelve months [...] so her kids could pick her out in an identity parade' (*HSD*, p. 59). Similarly, Simpson's character Nicola in 'Burns and the Bankers' is a successful business woman and a mother to four children. She, too, is aware that however adeptly she manages her home life, society will persist in judging her harshly: 'the most hurtful thing always was the assumption that because she was successful at work she must have sacrificed her children; that her children must have suffered' (*HY*, p.103).

During a work dinner, at which Nicola is the only woman to attend in a working capacity, she becomes lost in a reverie of conflicting motherhood discourses. Triggered by a look from a male colleague's wife, Nicola imagines herself scrutinised by what Kaplan defines as the 'institutional, familial, religious and other codes that hem us in, that define what is, and is not, possible, define our place in culture' (Kaplan, p.49). That one look from a stay-at-home mother, for Nicola, delivers judgment: 'you, with your four wheeled drive and your greedy ways. I don't know why you bother to have children if you don't look after them' (*HY*, p.91). Nicola can 'feel it all around her, history, these chaps, their wives, waiting to drive her back indoors' (*HY*, p. 93) but 'she couldn't take a couple of years off. No. She'd be dead in the water. She wouldn't be allowed back in' (*HY*, p.94). However, despite her protests to the contrary,



Simpson reveals Nicola feels guilt for working, and far from *having it all*, a career has indeed meant the sacrifice of her family life. Her success at work may have afforded the family,

a beautiful house [but] [...] she was never in it. She knew what the children were doing at every hour of the day, and she wasn't there. She kept it all up in the air, she never lost her grip. So much so that it would be positively dangerous for her to relax. (HY, p.79)

The issue of whether a mother should raise her own children or be free to outsource the mainstay of her maternal function so that she can pursue her career remains ambivalent in these texts. Without a clear division to be drawn between what constitutes a genuine moral argument to stay at home and what is merely the product of manipulative discourse, Nicola is left to flounder between guilt and righteous indignation.

### Having It All

The popular culture of the late 1980s to mid 1990s was keen to promote the idea that mothers could now '*Have it All*': 'Power. Money. Success. And a happy family' (to quote from the preface of Maeve Haran's bestselling story of the same title).<sup>47</sup> Government initiatives have been

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<sup>47</sup> The term *Having it All* was first coined in the 1980s and depicted working mothers as superwomen, who were able to enjoy 'Power. Money. Success. And a happy family': a claim made on the flyleaf of Maeve Haran's bestselling story of the same title. Maeve Haran, *Having It All* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992). This image captured the public imagination and stimulated much debate, as well as spawning other fictional explorations, such as Helen Gurley Brown's *Having it All* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982) and a number of films, such as *Baby Boom*. Dir. Shyer. United Artists. 1987. Disillusionment has since challenged the notion of 'Having it All' as a fantasy since many discovered the reality 'was tantamount to having none of it' (Whelehan, p.16). Pearson's

introduced to aid women to return to work as early as possible after giving birth. Yet these novels and memoirs expose this notion of glamorous working motherhood as a fantasy. In reality, work and motherhood is depicted as 'juggling [and] struggling' and often, eventually proves untenable. Pearson, author of *I Don't Know How She Does It*, clearly couldn't 'do it' any more and resigned as columnist for the *Daily Telegraph* suffering from depression. BBC Radio 4 reported her as saying 'we always knew there would be a cost for *having it all*, but what we didn't know was that it would be our mental health'.<sup>48</sup>

However, both working and *stay-at-home* mothers in these stories appear to experience pressure to self-sacrifice. Rozsika Parker asserts that this also is the case for real-life mothers:

Not only mothers in paid employment but all mothers have to negotiate their lived experience of motherhood with the maternal ideal. It is an indication of the oppressive effect of the ideal that we start to believe that some mother somewhere is managing it: a mother not in paid employment, a mother with more money, a mother with fewer children, a mother with a more supportive partner. (Parker, R., p.41)

The fictional texts and memoir studied in this thesis are unanimous in identifying the vestiges of patriarchy as the cause for their maternal dissatisfaction and feelings of guilt. In *Mother of all Myths*, Forna reiterates a now frequent criticism of feminism:

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*How She Does It* is an obvious exposé of this misleading expectation, as is Simpson's short story 'Burns and the Bankers' (2000) in *HY*, pp.73-113.

<sup>48</sup> Radio 4, News Item, 28 April 2010.

An oversight on the part of the feminist movement as a whole has been to ignore motherhood [...] believing that if all the available political energy was devoted to increasing women's career choices and achieving economic independence, motherhood would somehow take care of itself (Forna, p.11).<sup>49</sup>

Cusk's memoir decries what she perceives as an inevitable 'slide into deeper patriarchy' with motherhood: 'the father's day would gradually gather to it the armour of the outside world, of money and authority and importance, while the mother's remit would extend to cover the whole domestic sphere' (*ALW*, p.5). Dorrie's experience in 'Hey Yeah' debates Cusk's concerns. With Dorrie at home with her children, her day can revolve around, 'thinking of other people' (*HY*, p.36) as opposed to herself. As well as nurturing her children, her role as carer now extends to include her husband: 'she ought to pick up Max's jacket from the cleaners [...] then there was Max's mother's birthday present to be bought' (*HY*, p.36). Letting go of her own career and looking after three young children full-time depletes Dorrie emotionally and physically and Simpson depicts Max as getting the better deal out of their post-parenthood division of labour: 'I'm shattered, she would groan to Max on his return [from work], hale and whole, from the outside world' (*HY*, p.46). Simpson's story is unequivocal concerning the power-relations in their household: Max's position is that children are women's work and he will not *do* childcare. Even when Dorrie, in an exhausted state, begs him for

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<sup>49</sup> See also Freely, *What About Us!: An Open Letter to the Mothers Feminism Forgot*.

a little help with the children - 'if you could just take them for a few hours now and then and be *nice* to them' (*HY*, p.55) - her pleas are ignored. Similarly, successful entrepreneur Eva in *Kevin* is expected to be main carer for their son, despite having the greater earning potential:

Fair enough, as a freelancer you didn't want your long term clients to find an alternative scout, whereas my own company could be trusted to underlings and wouldn't just go away. But somehow this meant I was stuck all day with hell in a hand basket while you tooled merrily off in your baby-blue pickup to window shop for fields with the right-coloured cows. I suspected that if our situation was reversed – you headed a thriving company and I was a lone freelance location scout – Eva would be expected to drop the scouting altogether like a hot brick. (*K*, p.91)

Although this selection of literature appears to be assuming a passé feminist position, the authors are articulating current difficulties. The reality of children requiring twenty-four hour care has not changed and satisfactory solutions remain thin on the ground.<sup>50</sup> In addition, these texts indicate a subtle change for the worse in the expectations of modern patriarchy. Although Kate in *How She Does It* has achieved equality with her husband in that they both remain at work after having children, inequality still reigns in the Shattock household. Despite earning a higher

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<sup>50</sup> In autumn 2001, 2.4 million working age people in the UK were economically inactive and looking after the family or home. Of these, 2.2 million were women. Guy Weir, National Statistics Feature: Labour Market Trends, November 2002. Guy Weir, 'The economically inactive who look after the family or home', in *National Statistics*, 110:11 (November 2002), 577-88. In February 2009, the same report analysed data slightly differently but still found that the main difference in the reasons for inactivity were related to family responsibilities. For females aged 25-34, 70.3% gave this as their reason for economic inactivity, compared with 10% of men of the same age group. Debra Leaker, 'Economic Inactivity', Office for National Statistics, *Economic and Labour Market Review*, 3:2 (February 2009), ed. by David Harper (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

wage than her husband, organisation of family life still falls to Kate. Kate is responsible for arranging childcare and her children's education, as well as anything else that falls within the domestic sphere. Here Kate humorously describes Christmas from a working mother's perspective:

Like any other family, the Shattocks have their Christmas traditions. One tradition is that I buy all the presents for my side of the family and I buy all the presents for our children and our two godchildren and I buy Richard's presents and presents for Richard's parents and his brother Peter and Peter's wife Cheryl and their three kids and Richard's Uncle Alf who drives across from Matlock every Boxing Day [...] if Richard remembers, and dependent on late opening hours, he buys a present for me. (*HSD*, p.46)

The right to work has contributed to an unexpected destabilising of the traditional mother function, and ironically, as a result more is now expected of her than under a more stringent form of patriarchy. It is men, not women, who can now 'have it all' – with their wives responsible for childcare, domestic arrangements and also expected to contribute significantly to the family finances. Max, Dorrie's husband in 'Hey Yeah', is far from satisfied with his wife's reluctant acquiescence to staying at home to raise his children and run the family's domestic and social life. Rather, he is agitated by his wife staying at home. He regards her sacrifice of 'giving up the world' as merely a desire to 'maligner round the house [...] it wasn't fair' (*HY*, p.51). To rectify what he considers to be an unequal division of labour, he suggests a part-time job for Dorrie at his wood yard:

'Robin starts nursery after Easter, Maxine's nearly finished there, and Martin's doing fine at full-time school now. So you can work the mornings, then you can collect Robin and Maxine and bring them along for a sandwich and work round them from then until its time to pick up Martin. We can leave the paperwork 'til the evening.'

'And when would I do the meals and the ironing and the cleaning and the shopping in all this?'

'Fit it in round the edges,' said Max. 'Other women do. It'll be good for you, get you out of the house. Come on Dorrie, I can't carry passengers forever. You'll have to start pulling your weight again.' (HY, p.53)

These accounts of motherhood suggest the fact that a familial and political solution that combines child-rearing and careers successfully for both parents has yet to be found. Despite the achievements of the feminist movement, with equal rights and equal pay legislation, mothers are still having to sacrifice their own desires and ambitions for the sake of their families: whereas the majority of fathers do not. Modern motherhood is marred, therefore, by a perception of failure. These characters believed they could 'have it all' and blame themselves for their failure to do so. Dorrie's reflections confirm this failure during an eventful school run:

'We're late', hissed Dorrie, but even in the middle of this felt a great sick thud of relief that it was not two years ago when she had been racing against the clock to get to work [...] when at last she caved in, when she had given in her notice, it felt like giving up the world [...] after all she had

not managed to keep both worlds up in the air. She knew she had failed. (HY, p.27)

Similarly, Pearson's strap line for her novel *How She Does It - A Comedy about Failure, a Tragedy about Success* refers to Kate's perception of herself as a failure as a mother due to her success at work. As Doris Lessing remarked, 'real equality comes when childcare is sorted out and it hasn't been yet, well not for those who really need it anyway'.<sup>51</sup>

Simpson's story, 'Burns and the Bankers', poses a yet to be answered question: 'why bother flogging [your daughters] over exam hurdles if your girls are going to end up like you, sipping coffee in between school runs' (HY, p.93). Kaplan identifies a malign patriarchy for the failure of women to 'have it all', claiming that "Sex, Work and Motherhood" is evidently too threatening a combination on a series of levels' (Kaplan, p.196). She observes that alternative representations of motherhood (that do not depict 'juggling and struggling') are in the main only to be found within the science fiction genre: and these most often offer visions of dystopias, for example Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.<sup>52</sup> Kaplan argues that by creating worlds altered by environmental effects such as radiation and chemicals, women writers can imagine postmodern worlds where the issue of the nuclear family is no longer central. She proposes that this shift away from contesting dominant sexuality, marriage and the family 'arguably signals the end of

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<sup>51</sup> In the same interview, Lessing claimed that much of the 'great energy whipped up by feminism [had] been lost in hot air and fine words when we should have been concentrating on changing laws'. Fiachra Gibbons, 'Lay Off Men, Lessing tells Feminists', *Guardian*, 14 August 2001, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/aug/14/edinburghfestival2001.edinburghbookfestival2001.html>> [accessed 27 April 2011]

<sup>52</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986); (London: Vintage, 1996).

the feminisms that the 1960s gave rise to' (Kaplan, p.215). Yet this type of fictional representation does nothing to address the current situation for mothers, the complexities of which

suggest the need for a new theoretical paradigm. Culture arguably confronts a post-feminist historical moment that is a moment in which prior feminist interventions, having had their effects, can no longer be undertaken in the old ways. (Kaplan, p.215)

Although Kaplan was writing in 1992, the realist novels and memoirs discussed here reflect that as a society we are no further forward in terms of freeing the mother from an inequitable degree of self-sacrifice.

### **The Ascendancy of Scientific Discourse and its Importance to Meaning in Twenty-First Century Motherhood**

Patriarchy (or a capitalist system) is not the only discourse to require maternal self-sacrifice: the myth of the ideal mother is now being re-constructed within science and medicine. In *A Life's Work*, Cusk alludes to the breakdown of communities and the geographical displacement of families: as a consequence, mothers are no longer 'told what to do by *their* mothers' and Cusk's mother bought her 'a childcare manual' instead (*ALW*, p.112). Cusk's turning to a child care manual for help in understanding motherhood denotes a general trend away from the spiritual and familial to a more scientific understanding of life that informs



motherhood in the twenty-first century.<sup>53</sup> Cusk's experience is not unique: it is mirrored in contemporary fiction. Shriver's Eva also identifies a scientific self-help book as being instrumental in her early perceptions of Kevin: 'aren't we supposed to be listening to Mozart? Maybe Talking Heads isn't in The Book [...] better look it up' (K, p.64). Margo Daly in *Gas and Air* wished to be 'totally prepared for the birth of [her] first baby' by

the constant referring to not only the Kurtzinger bible but also Penelope Leach and Janet Balaskas (the UK trio of gurus), the Australian Kaz Cooke's irreverent manual *The Real [sic] Guide to Pregnancy* and that American classic *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. (GA, p.5)

The twenty-first century discourse of motherhood offers a primarily *scientific* understanding of how to be a mother.

Foucault identified science as a prevailing discourse of the modern age, and as such used it to demonstrate how discourse operates. He asserted that scientific disciplines decree what is normal behaviour for our social and physical selves. He contended that wherever the word *natural*, for example, 'appears in the discourses of the human sciences the natural always conceals within it the aspect of a "norm"' (White, p.128). Any law, therefore, to arise from the study of the natural is nothing more than a rule by which to define normal and discriminate against those who are not. Hence, normal is defined by the disciplines

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<sup>53</sup> Reliance on a scientific explanation of motherhood began as early as the 1960s. Margaret Forster and her mother disagree over her desire to breastfeed: 'feeding on demand didn't make any sense to her either. She'd never heard of Truby King' (Forster, p.267).

and is enforced through the teaching in schools, hospitals and the confessional. These institutions thus operate as instruments of orthodoxy. Foucault extrapolated his observations to conclude that in society discourse confers power on all of us, as the human sciences have taught us to identify difference and, if need be, to marginalise it.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, the individual (having been educated by the discourses of their particular historical period), along with the state, has the power to censor what is and is not to be considered normal.

The concept of medical *norms* is established in the earliest stages of the relationship between mothers and their children. It is currently common practice for the medical profession to issue new mothers with a Redbook: a Personal Child Health Record in which to monitor and record any deviancy from the *norm*. The average weight, height, talking and walking ages are supplied so that the mother can compare her offspring to an ideal, non-existent *average* child. This information, which covers both the physical and psychological development of the child, is to be presented upon request to the medical profession to help identify any irregularities in the child's progress. This monitoring continues throughout the child's school life, with hearing and eyesight, weight and height measurements being taken at regular intervals. In *Kevin*, Eva is so familiar with this system of classification for her child that she hopes to work it to her advantage. She pursues a

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<sup>54</sup> It is ironic that identity was an unintentional/undesired outcome of a process that hoped to promote uniformity. Foucault claims 'it is apparent how modern reflection [...] moves towards a certain thought of the Same - in which Difference is the same thing as identity'. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (1966), trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Routledge, 1970), p.315, cited in White, p.124.

medical diagnosis of *Different* or *Other* for her son in an attempt to justify her concerns about him and exonerate her from suspicions of failure as a mother:

So insistent was I that Foulke pin a disability to our son, stamp a name - brand American syndrome on Kevin's forehead, that the paediatrician must have thought me one of those neurotic mothers who crave distinction for her child but who in our civilisation's latter-day degeneracy could only conceive of the exceptional in terms of deficiency or affliction. (K, p.113)<sup>55</sup>

The depiction of the observation of medical norms by the white middle class mothers in the texts considered in this thesis brings to mind Fredric Jameson's observation that the bourgeoisie are the behaving classes.

### **The Scientific Appropriation of Motherhood: The Maternal Body**

Current literary depictions of pregnancy and early motherhood expose the insidious infiltration of the medical professions into the private sphere of the mother and child. When first pregnant, both Cusk and Eva consider themselves under siege from the medical profession. Cusk reports being presented with

a spray of leaflets by the hospital, about diet, acupuncture, yoga, antenatal classes, parentcraft classes, hypnotism and waterbirth [...] for modern pregnancy is governed by

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<sup>55</sup> This is an exemplary illustration of Foucault's contention that individuality is an outcome of the Same/Different continuum. Shriver's depiction of contemporary society depicts a culture where individuality in children is perceived as an indication of potential abnormality.

a regime breathtaking in its homogeneity of its propaganda, its insignia, its language. No Korean cheerleading team was ever ruled with so iron a rod as pregnant women in the English speaking world. (*ALW*, p.25)

Eva in *Kevin* also 'couldn't shake the feeling of having been appropriated' (*K*, p. 58). Eva's reflections on 'crossing the threshold to motherhood' (*K*, p.52) reveal her resentment of having been annexed by the discourses of the human sciences:

Suddenly you become social property, the animate equivalent of a public park. That coy expression, 'you're eating for two now, dear,' is all by way of goading that your very dinner is no longer a private affair. Indeed, as the land of the free has become increasingly coercive, the inference seems to run that, 'you're eating for us now', for 200-some million meddlers, any one of whose prerogative it is to object should you ever be in the mood for a jelly donut and not a full meal with whole grains and leafy vegetables that covers all five major food groups. The right to boss pregnant women around was surely on its way to the Constitution. (*K*, p.52)

Cusk similarly observes that a populace apparently educated in the finer points of nutrition provides yet another opportunity to subjugate pregnant women; 'when you raise your fork to your lips, reads one book on the subject, look at it and think, is this the best bite I can give my baby? If the answer is no, put your fork down' (*ALW*, p.30).

Cusk and Shriver appear to hold a Foucaultian understanding of why 'the body can become like a public space, like a telephone box' (*ALW*, p.34). Foucault provides an interpretation of our present that argues that the disciplines do *not* exist primarily as an instrument of

power, as some feminists believe, but for the administration of 'life' (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p.14). He asserts that modern methods of power have assumed responsibility for life processes: births, deaths, sickness, disease, sexual relations, hygiene and so on. The basis of government is now the control and management of these life processes. For the first time in history, then, biological existence is reflected in political existence. With the disciplines' preoccupation with norms and the resulting standardisation of life processes, the fact of 'living' has passed into knowledge's control and under power's authority. 'Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself' (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p.146).

In following the recurrent theme of the appropriation of the maternal body through contemporary texts, tensions become apparent within the field of discourse theory. Unlike Foucault, Nietzsche perceives 'the will to power' (as opposed to 'the will to truth') to be the inspiration for the development of discourse. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche argues that power comes from the top down in the ruthless domination of the weaker by the stronger.<sup>56</sup> He regards language itself as the expression of the power of the masters. Nietzsche's ideas on 'the will to power' have received enduring acceptance among feminist constructionists. In *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* Seyla

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<sup>56</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morality* (1887), ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Benhabib accepts Nietzsche's politics of oppression, contending that the 'logic of binary oppositions is also the logic of subordination'.<sup>57</sup>

However, Foucault's conception of discourse again contradicts the feminist interpretation of discursively constituted female oppression it helped to inspire. For although Foucault coined the phrase 'language is oppression', and his initial identification of the scholarly disciplines and disciplinary practices as the source of discourse and enforcement appears to support Nietzsche's stance, Foucault does not believe that language is controlled by the masters to subordinate the lower orders of society. Indeed, power is not the focus of Foucault's analysis, although it is fundamental to understanding his work. For Foucault, 'power is everywhere' (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p.93). But power as Foucault conceives of it is a nebulous construct, dynamic and constantly shifting and, therefore, it is impossible for him to entertain the notion that power could be controlled by any one group.

Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere [...] power comes from below; that is there is no binary opposition and all encompassing opposition between ruler and ruled at the root of power relations. (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p.93)

Foucault does not share postmodernist concerns that power is negative. In fact, his beliefs stand in direct opposition: 'we must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: It "excludes", it "represses", it "censors", it "abstracts", it "masks", it "conceals". In fact

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<sup>57</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p.15.

power produces; it produces reality' (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.194).

Therefore, Foucault's theorisations challenge any conception of contemporary society that, for example, would perceive female oppression in a patriarchal system. Contemporary representations of pregnancy and birth are inevitably informed by feminist debate, becoming a central feminist issue through the research of women like Barbara Katz Rothman who asserted that

after forceps were developed during the seventeenth century, men started to get involved with live births and to challenge the authorities of midwives. As the field of medicine professionalised, physicians excluded women practitioners, monopolised technology, especially forceps, and devalued the practical knowledge and experience of midwives. (Chase and Rogers, p.146)<sup>58</sup>

Significantly, however, recent literature reflects a shift in its focus of anger. Cusk lampoons the feminist 'sense of political outrage at the patriarchal medicalisation of birth':

Pain has been created by the fact that men make women lie on their backs and stay still during labour, when any primitive woman could tell you to stick with your sisters,

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<sup>58</sup> Rothman compared the findings of 1,046 hospital births with the same number of planned home deliveries. Although the infant death rates were similar in both groups, the hospital births were found to have higher instances of maternal high blood pressure, post-partum haemorrhage, newborns requiring resuscitation, birth injuries, caesareans, episiotomies and severe tears. Barbara Katz Rothman, *In Labor: Women and Power in the Birthplace* (New York: Norton, 1991). This study was conducted by Lewis E. Mehl, 'Research on Childbirth Alternatives: What Can it Tell Us About Hospital Practice?' in *21<sup>st</sup> Century Obstetrics Now!* ed. by L. Stewart and D. Stewart (Chapel Hill, N.C.: NAPSCA, 1977), cited in Chase and Rogers, p.146.

stay on your feet and keep MEN well out of it [...] a hospital is a place where MEN are and hence that as soon as you set foot in one your chances of artificial rupture of membranes, chemical induction of labour, electronic foetal monitoring, stalled labour, epidural, paralysis, forceps delivery, caesarean section and the baby being artificially respiration afterwards are greatly increased. (ALW, p.36)

Cusk's parody highlights the fact that feminist arguments on the patriarchal medicalisation of birth are now anachronistic. For twenty-first-century mothers, the 1970s concept of *sticking with your sisters* (or indeed the notion of a sisterhood) is risible: yet, organisations like the National Childbirth Trust still offer advice coloured by a preference for midwives and a wariness of doctors in the delivery room.<sup>59</sup> Cusk expresses her frustration at the inapplicability of feminism's strategies for female empowerment whilst giving birth: '*some women find birth the most intensely pleasurable experience of their lives*, [she] read. This miraculous claim is made by the proponents of natural, or active, birth' (ALW, p.35). More importantly, the politicisation of birth has the potential to obscure the meaning of birth for mothers, with the mother's first introduction to her child framed by a patriarchal/feminist power struggle.

Both Cusk and Shriver identify a new enemy in their texts. Men are not to be considered the persecutors of women - rather their persecution arises from a modernity concerned with what Foucault described as the 'administration of life'. This modernity includes both men and women alike, as do the disciplines that give rise to the

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<sup>59</sup> This is an anecdotal observation based on my own attendance at NCT courses prior to the birth of my first son in 1999.



discursive formations that decree the 'norms' for our physical and social selves and therefore, to a degree dictate 'who we can be'. During their labours both Eva and Cusk are administered to by harsh *female* doctors. Eva informs us that her obstetrician, Dr. Rhinestein, was, 'a cold young woman for her profession, with an aloof clinical temperament that would have suited her better for pharmaceutical trials with rats' (*K*, p. 52). Cusk is similarly persecuted by 'a militant junior doctor keen to practice inserting things into veins [who] falls on me hungrily. She offers blood tests, the implantation of a canula. I refuse them. Quietly enraged, she disappears and returns with back up' (*ALW*, p.38). The description of these female doctors suggests that it is the discipline to which they belong that is responsible for their unsympathetic treatment of their patients, not their gender. As Cusk suggests, advancement in their profession is, to some extent, exigent on how many procedures junior doctors get to perform. Furthermore, the practice of any scientific discipline has always prized objectivity and a consequence of this is the creation of distance from the humanity of the patient. There is an obvious historical argument to be made that since the medical profession was a discipline founded on the teachings of men, it may be institutionally unsympathetic to women. Today, however, and in particular in the field of obstetrics, women doctors and midwives have the power to treat and influence treatment.

Another medical discourse that features in contemporary texts is the 'breast is best' campaign. Government initiatives that promote breastfeeding have made it increasingly difficult for middle-class women

in our society *not* to breastfeed. The current discourse is based on evidence that suggests that to choose not to breastfeed (or not be physically able to do so) is to fail to provide your child with the best start. Cusk, like many new mothers, experiences difficulties with breastfeeding and, therefore, comes to the notice of an unsympathetic health visitor:

She looks at me sharply, like a bird. 'Are you feeding her?' she says. I realise that she is talking about breastfeeding. Her reluctance to utter the word 'breast' is clear. I say that I am. 'In that case it will be something in your milk', she says. 'Oh', I say. 'Yes, she is *very* dainty [...] and *small*, isn't she? How much does she weigh?' I tell her. She requests the baby's growth chart. I show it to her. She examines it in silence. 'Your baby is failing to thrive [...] you risk damaging her brain. Do you want to have a brain damaged baby?' I feel it unnecessary to reply to this question. (*ALW*, p.68)

Cusk is left with a feeling of guilt and failure following this encounter, and makes an immediate appointment with her doctor. 'My baby is failing to thrive, I tell her, bursting into her office. The doctor replies that she is absolutely fine. In fact, she's lovely, she says' (*ALW*, p.68). The fervour that currently surrounds breastfeeding obviously, in the case of this particular health visitor, confers upon her the power to judge and subordinate Cusk. This sense of righteousness may also explain the remorseless degree of self-sacrifice demanded by the modern breastfeeding regime, as Cusk discovers to her horror:

The modern regime is all supply and demand. It recommends feeding the baby whenever she is hungry, by which means

the breasts will produce the amount of milk she wants. You may be surprised by how hungry she is; you may find yourself feeding her twenty or thirty times in twenty-four hours, but don't worry! *It is impossible to over feed a breastfed baby* [...] I leaf through books on the subject looking for some mention of myself, some hint of concern for me as I sit pinioned twenty to thirty times a day to my armchair, but there is none. (ALW, p. 99) <sup>60</sup>

A feminist interpretation would argue that the growing insistence of the medical professions that motherhood is to be entirely child-focused is in reaction to women's growing independence and power in the workplace. Women (in career terms) are now more of a threat to men than they have ever been. Women no longer regard it as acceptable to stay at home looking after their husband following marriage, and the discourses that urged this course of action have become obsolete. The married, childless Eva is far more successful than her husband and both husband and wife are reconciled to this state of affairs. Eva is constantly jetting off to foreign climes, whilst Franklin waits at home for her return. However, motherhood has successfully ensured a reversal of roles along more traditional lines, with Eva now staying at home to look after the baby: or, as she affectionately calls Kevin 'hell in a hand basket' (K, p. 91).

It is worth observing that the breastfeeding tyranny described by Cusk is for the most part exercised by women over women:

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<sup>60</sup> The breastfeeding regime described here by Cusk is a consequence of the recent trend toward child-led parenting. Kirsty Young observes this trend in a recent television series: 'we've become a much more child-centric society – it's become a badge of honour to say your life revolves around your children'. BBC 2 series, *The British Family*, January 2010. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00pys16>> [accessed 14 January 2010]

Do you want to try putting her to the breast? the midwife enquires as I am wheeled from the operating theatre [following a caesarean]. I look at her as if she has just asked me to make her a cup of tea, or tidy up the room a bit. I still inhabit that other world in which, after operations, people are pitied and looked after and left to recuperate. (ALW, p.95)

It is more the case of a government concerned with life processes, as identified by Foucault - as opposed to an omniscient patriarchy – that has produced a discourse which proposes that total self-sacrifice on the part of the mother is best suited to the well-being of the child. Since any modernity concerned with the administration of life will develop theories that operate on a biological level, today's liberated women are more in danger of being locked into specific positions than their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers before them (who, ironically, lived at a time of legally sanctioned patriarchy).

Cusk's research into breastfeeding unearths a more humane regime for mothers:

In the old days, I am informed, women breastfed their babies for strictly twenty minutes every four hours. They weren't 'allowed', they say, to do anything else. Those who adhered to it were, I imagine, delighted with this imaginary prohibition. (ALW, p.98)

Prior to this recommended *best-practice*, putting baby on the bottle, or earlier still, out to wet-nurse was commonly accepted. It is ironic, then, that when the medical profession was indeed more dominated by men

than it is today, it produced a discourse that granted mothers more *rights* to an autonomous self, than does the current breastfeeding regime expounded to Cusk.<sup>61</sup>

It is illuminating to realise that information offered as the *truth* can change over time. Rozsika Parker notes that these changes can often happen very quickly: 'up to 1991, most babies were laid to sleep on their fronts, for safety reasons. Following the publication of research findings, babies are nowadays placed on their backs or sides for their own protection' (Parker, R., p.2). She also observes that the 'rigidity' scientific discourse imposes on mothers can be gauged 'from the schism that opens between different generations of mothers' (Parker, R., p. 2), as alluded to earlier by Cusk. Thus, scientific discourse undermines the actual experience of mothering and creates an overreliance on its dictates. More crucially still, however, is that just at the historical moment when politically sanctioned patriarchy and the religious discourses that urged self-sacrifice for mothers have begun to lose their influence, medical discourses have stepped up to reinforce the maternal sacrifice narrative.

Foucault's discourse analysis may not demonstrate why a discourse is nuanced in a certain way or who is responsible. However,

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<sup>61</sup> A feminist interpretation is also valid here. It is true that new biological discourses have emerged to make women relinquish careers and stay at home and look after baby (as is exemplified with breastfeeding). In the 1960s, when mothers accepted their stay-at-home role, established discourses not only found bottle-feeding acceptable but sometimes advocated it over breastfeeding. For Forster's mother in Forster's memoir *Hidden Lives*, 'breastfeeding was associated in her mind with poverty and she couldn't understand how any educated woman could do it. It was another backward step, further proof she didn't understand the modern generation' (Forster, p.267). Now, with women having established their right to return to work after child bearing, a rigorous breastfeeding regime is introduced, with on-demand feeding recommended for the first year of the baby's life. This doctrine makes a token gesture toward the working mother, assuring her as to the ease with which one can express milk in the toilet cubicle at work.

his work recognises distortion to be a feature intrinsic to discourse production and his theories hence promote awareness and debate. Discourses most often contain an element of truth (such as, breast milk is better than bottle milk), but in this instance how this milk is provided is irrelevant. Breastfeeding on-demand to the degree recommended to Cusk on the birth of her daughter can itself be counterproductive, as an exhausted mother is often *less* able to produce milk or care for her child adequately. The difficulty of a government concerned with life processes is that the knowledge it produces operates on the level of (seemingly) indisputable biological fact. The distinction to be made between the biological and ethical arguments urging self-sacrifice can thus be blurred, and when this happens, a discourse can become difficult to resist.

In this respect, the Government intervention that has resulted from the standardisation of life processes poses more of a threat to women than any latent sexism within patriarchy. Child bearing and rearing is primarily about a relationship which, by definition, describes an intimate, personal affair. In Shriver's novel, Kevin defends this point of view when questioned by a reporter about his relationship with his mother: 'it's *private*, Okay? Such a thing in this country anymore as *private*, or do I have to tell you the colour of my underwear?' (K, p.354). Mother and baby are first and foremost individuals, not *norms* or measurable entities on a *same/different* continuum. To view labour, the birth process or indeed the developing child from the perspective of the human sciences detracts from the humanity of both child and mother.

Perhaps as a consequence, twenty-first-century depictions of the mother and her baby in fiction and memoir lack what one would most expect to find: descriptions of the beginnings of a new and enduring relationship. There is very little description of the baby's individual personality, its habits, first smiles or moments of intimacy. In the main, these novels engage with the myth of the ideal self-sacrificing mother, and how the mothers in the stories attempt to manage, what Figes describes as, 'the relentless self-sacrifice without feeling as if [their] entire self has been sucked up by the vacuum cleaner' (Figes, p.viii). These accounts also attest to the fact that whichever discourse(s) is in ascendance, be it religious, patriarchal or medical, the message for mothers has remained largely unchanged: give of yourself.<sup>62</sup>

When Cusk identifies the influence of childcare manuals over contemporary motherhood, she also hints at an explanation as to why the humanity of the relationship between mother and child is currently receiving less emphasis. She positions childcare manuals on the shop floor of the book shop symbolically:

There are books about motherhood, as there are about most things. To reach them you must pass nearly everything, the civilised world of fiction and poetry [for] childcare manuals are situated at the far end of recorded human experience, just past diet books and just before astrology. (*ALW*, p.111)

Her detailing of the layout of the book shop reflects the moral relativism characteristic of postmodernism, a feature Terry Eagleton

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<sup>62</sup> The moral argument behind self-sacrificing motherhood is discussed in chapter four.

alludes to as a blurring of the 'boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' culture', as well as between 'art and everyday experience' (Eagleton, T., p.vii). In today's culture, no one subject is accorded more importance than another: all topics are now considered equal. Therefore, books that hope to help women with the transition to motherhood are accorded the same degree of importance as books which aim to inform you, Cusk jests, of 'how to mend your motorbike or plant begonias and books about doing your own tax return' (*ALW*, p.111). Hence, as Eva acknowledges to Kevin, 'motherhood was harder than I expected' (*K*, p. 56). Whereas she had anticipated

'mopping up vomit. Baking Christmas cookies. I couldn't have expected [...] that simply *forming an attachment* to you,' I phrased as diplomatically as I knew how, 'would be so much work. I thought' – I took a breath. 'I thought that part came for free'. (*K*, p.57)

This reductive approach to motherhood obviously has an effect on its status and meaning. The twenty-first-century practice of motherhood has become a *consumable*: where one can buy a 'How To' book to fix its challenges and solve its mysteries. Cusk's allusion to walking past 'the civilised world of fiction and poetry' suggests a turning away from the ethical and emotional nature of early twentieth-century representations of motherhood. Child rearing is now positioned outside of meaning and the depths of human experience.

Twenty-first century mothers are also divided from their offspring by a scientific discourse that is not their own: a language that does not fit



the subject. It is a distancing language: its purpose is to describe, to rationalise and analyse. Cusk acknowledges the effect repositioning motherhood under scientific enquiry can have, owing to the suspicion that nowadays 'it is possible, I sense, to make a specialism out of anything and hence unravel the native confidence of those you address' (*ALW*, p.111). Confidence in one's ability to mother has been undermined, giving rise to anxiety and a degree of disconnection between mother and baby. Mothers are encouraged to approach their babies like a science project – and are not prepared for the human being they encounter. Dally defines this type of mother as 'intellectual':

These mothers are usually diligent and many of them are frequent attenders of general practitioners, paediatricians, clinics and social workers. They buy baby books and magazines galore, thrive on the whole idea of 'techniques' of baby and child care and are always searching for advice from outside rather than for their own feeling and intuition. They tend to fall for current conventional wisdom in child care and if they manage to *find and use their feelings at all*, they do this by intellectual means which in turn blocks their feelings. (Dally, p.245)

Although Dally made her (rather harsh) observations in 1982, the character of Ruth in *The Little House* (1998) is an illustration of the continuance of this approach to motherhood. 'Ruth had not expected to be a good mother; but she had set herself the task of learning how to do it. Conscientious and intelligent, she had done her absolute best to

master theories of childbirth and child-raising. But Thomas was a law to himself' (*LH*, p.80).<sup>63</sup>

### **Postmodernism and Feminism – Accidentally Throwing the Baby out with the Bath Water**

The combination of the moral relativism championed by postmodernism, the suspicion that language does not simply represent the real, and the ascendancy of a primarily scientific understanding of our world have unintentionally had a flattening effect on our appreciation of the diverse nature and richness of human experience. In *Kevin*, Eva observes a world where 'everything is reduced to the sum of its parts' (*K*, p.136). Initially, she observes this reductive perception of life in Kevin's grandfather: 'pointlessness has never bothered your grandfather. Life is a collection of cells and electrical impulses to him, it is material, which is why material is everything. And this prosaic vision contents him – or it did' (*K*, p.138). However, not only does her son Kevin share this diminished appreciation of life, he takes this understanding, tragically one step further: 'so herein lies the contrast: Kevin too, suspects that materials are everything. He just doesn't happen to care about the materials' (*K*, p.138).

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<sup>63</sup> Ruth, as a turn of this century mother, 'stuck to the book, which said that the baby should be fed on demand and never left to cry, even though it meant that she could never settle to anything during the day, and never slept at night for more than a couple of hours at a time' (p. 86). Elizabeth, a mother from an earlier generation, is scathing of 'the book', instructing Ruth to leave Thomas to cry: 'if he's safe in his cot or pram he'll just drop off again' (*LH*, p. 86). Elizabeth has much more faith in her own judgement with regard to childcare than Ruth, who is reliant on the Mother and Baby Clinic: 'Elizabeth suppressed her opinion of weight charts when anyone holding this armful of wet kicking baby could know they had a perfectly fit child in their arms' (*LH*, p.93).

*Kevin* is an examination of the failure of the mother and child relationship. Shriver contextualises this failure against the backdrop of what Eva perceives as 'our civilisation's latter-day degeneracy' (*K*, p.113). The novel is written in response to a spate of real-life mass shootings that swept America during the 1990s. Shooting of innocent civilians for *reasons unknown* has become a world-wide phenomena, to the degree that these incidents now have categories, as Eva ironically observes: 'there were Workplace shootings, and there were School shootings, quite another field of concentration altogether' (*K*, p.122). Modern society appears to be under threat: from the failure of our most intimate, familial relationships to our relationships with complete strangers.<sup>64</sup> When Eva's firstborn son Kevin murders seven of his classmates, a teacher, his father and his sister with a crossbow shortly before his sixteenth birthday, this event is obviously a comment on contemporary society as well as on the failure of a mother-son relationship.

On a personal level, Eva and Kevin's relationship is hampered by Eva's resentment of her child. Eva has grown up as part of a generation of women that believe in sexual equality as a given. That Eva's character is informed by feminist argument is demonstrated in a dispute with her

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<sup>64</sup> Shriver's novel is included here because she explores Eva's lack of feeling as a mother as a potential factor in the *worldwide* phenomena of mass shootings. It is tempting to think of *Kevin* as a reflection on American society: however, there have been three infamous occurrences of mass shootings in the UK, that of Hungerford, Dunblane and, most recently, Cumbria. On 19 August 1987, Michael Ryan shot dead 16 people and wounded 15 others in and around the Berkshire town of Hungerford <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4075055.stm>> [accessed 29 April 2011]. On 13 March 1996, Thomas Hamilton killed 16 children and 1 teacher at Dunblane Primary School, Dunblane, Scotland, and wounded a further 15 children and teachers <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A11103580>> [accessed 29 April 2011]. On 2 June 2010, Derrick Bird killed 12 people and injured 11 others before killing himself, in the county of Cumbria <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/crime/article2563333.ece>> [accessed 29 April 2011]

husband over whose surname the baby should take. In response to his assertion it is 'traditional' for the baby to take its father's name, Eva responds sarcastically,

according to *tradition*, women couldn't own property until, in some states, the 1970s. *Traditionally* in the Middle East we walk round in black sacks and *traditionally* in Africa we get our clitorises carved out like a hunk of gristle [...] men have always gotten to name children after themselves, while not *doing any of the work*. (K, p.59)

The character of Eva should perhaps have heeded Cusk's warning:

childbirth and motherhood is the anvil upon which sexual inequality was forged, and the women in our society whose responsibilities, expectations and experience are like those of men are right to approach it with trepidation. (ALW, p.8)

After giving birth, it is Eva (not Franklin, her husband, who professes a desire to sacrifice everything for his son) who has to stay home and give up her former way of life to look after a difficult baby. Eva wrestles with the degree of self-sacrifice seemingly demanded of her by motherhood, as she informs the court at Kevin's trial, she found 'the sacrifice [to be] enormous' (K, p.123).

Women today *expect* equality within motherhood, only to find themselves confronted by a more traditional ideal of femininity with motherhood. Despite feminism's laudable efforts on behalf of womankind, an argument can be made that with regard to motherhood it has done more harm than good. Expectations of equality certainly

contribute to the impoverishment of the relationship between Eva and Kevin: and in general, all the writings considered here regard children in part, as 'rival consciousness(es)', a threat to the mother's personal fulfilment. Feminism could be regarded as a contributory factor to the tragedy of *Kevin* on two counts: it provides Eva with a discourse to articulate her dissatisfaction with motherhood and fuels her sense of injustice (which helps to further alienate her from her son), whilst providing no workable solution to help her change her situation for the better. The depictions of motherhood discussed in this thesis reflect a sense of having been left "high and dry" with regard to equality after having children.

There can be little doubt that Kevin's murder spree is a response to Eva's reluctant mothering. Significantly, he leaves her alive to witness his handiwork: more importantly still, the murders themselves are portrayed as his attempt at securing her undivided attention, which, he feels, he has so far not received. By her own admission, Eva's career, her husband and her daughter have had a greater share of her affections. Following Kevin's killings, Eva acknowledges that she may, partly, be to blame: "I expect it's my fault", I said defiantly. "I wasn't a very good mother – cold, judgemental, *selfish*" (*K*, p.165).

The narrative drive of *Kevin* attempts to establish Eva's right to selfhood, her own personal discourse of motherhood. Contrary to the norm, Eva refuses to claim to have experienced 'a Vulcan mind-meld' (*K*, p.56) on the instant of Kevin's birth. Instead, Eva boldly states, 'this is all I know. That on the 11<sup>th</sup> April, 1983, unto me a son was born and I felt

nothing' (K, p.83). Essentially, *Kevin* challenges the established discourse of self sacrifice – Shriver's novel is a resisting text. However, on the very last page of the novel, Eva is forced to concede defeat by the sheer weight of established discourse pitched against her. Following a battle of 'unrelenting ferocity' (K, p.400) between mother and son over who comes first in their relationship, she at last relinquishes her right to her own discourse on mothering and abnegates herself totally to Kevin. Kevin's actions have succeeded in manoeuvring Eva into taking second place to her child. For Kevin, literally as well as figuratively, has stripped away Eva's self throughout the course of the novel; her career, husband, daughter and standing in the community have been destroyed by him, so she is at last free to offer her son unconditional, selfless love:

Because after three days short of eighteen years, I can finally announce that I am too exhausted and too confused and too lonely to keep fighting, and if only out of desperation or even laziness I love my son [...] there is a second bedroom in my serviceable apartment. The bedspread is plain. A copy of Robin Hood lies on the bookshelf. And the sheets are clean. (K, p. 400)

With her offspring a mass murderer, the novel appears to falter in its advocacy of Eva's rights to her own discourse on motherhood. Shriver's novel appears to 'recuperate' the articulation of Eva's taboo 'desires and fantasies through the punishment of those daring to transgress given codes' (Kaplan, p.106).<sup>65</sup> The novel's conclusion

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<sup>65</sup> Kaplan makes this comment whilst discussing what she identifies as 'the maternal sacrifice paradigm' in *East Lynne*, Ellen Wood's novel of 1861 (Kaplan, p.106).

associates Eva's failure as a mother - 'I spurned him in return – he may have been a fifteenth my size, but it seemed fair at the time' (*K*, p. 400) - with Kevin's murderous actions. In *Kevin*, the reader is thus encouraged to consider Eva's mothering; surely she should have found a way, as the adult, to reach an accord with Kevin. The text implies that much of Kevin's anti-social behaviour is an attempt to induce his mother's love. A period of childhood illness gives Eva a hitherto unprecedented insight into her child: 'underneath the levels of fury, I was astonished to discover, lay a carpet of despair. He wasn't mad. He was sad' (*K*, p.263). Even his choice of murder weapon, the cross bow, is his deliberate attempt to remind Eva of this unique period of bonding between them, bringing to mind the anti-hero Robin Hood, the story she read to him during his illness.

However, the conclusion of *Kevin* is more an exposé of motherhood's restrictive and stringent terms and conditions. Eva is consistently denied her own discourse, her right to self, throughout the story, to the extent where she feels, as she informs Kevin, 'I had a life. You took it' (*K*, p.242). The novel implies that had the institution of motherhood not been so insistent on her total self-sacrifice, had it not been taboo to discuss her ambivalence to her pregnancy and fear of motherhood, and had it been more acceptable to her husband for her to work part-time (or for him to take over some of the care of Kevin) Eva may have been able to see Kevin less as a burden and more of a gift. For Eva was compelled to look after a very difficult baby with very little support and no one to talk to:

[She's] one of those *stay at home mothers*, at considerable sacrifice [...] [she] feared that at bottom [she] hated [her] life and hated being a mother and even in moments hated being [a] wife, since [her husband] had done this to [her], turned [her] days into an unending stream of shit and piss and cookies that Kevin didn't even like. (K, p.188)

Eva is forced to mother in a way that proves unendurable to her, which obviously affects her relationship with Kevin. Perhaps Eva could have given more of herself if she had not blamed Kevin for her experience of mothering and if the discourses of motherhood - the taboos which dictate 'what can be said' and limit 'who we can be' - had been less prescriptive. If Eva could have *talked about Kevin* things might have been otherwise. With her son a mass murderer, Shriver, with devastating irony, has recast her heroine in the required social form of self-sacrificing mother, a process in which many innocent people lose their lives.<sup>66</sup> Rozsika Parker argues in *Torn in Two* 'that the conditions of twenty-first-century mothering do significantly augment and intensify the unbearable aspects of ambivalence' (Parker, R., p.25).

The increase in resistant depictions of motherhood (those that question the mother as a figure of self-sacrifice and unconditional, instantaneous love) that emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century can be interpreted as partly a postmodern response to the mother as subject. However, Shriver reveals the other side of this desire to question all we once considered sacred by contextualising Eva's

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<sup>66</sup> The psychologists Diane Eyer and Ann Dally contend that the relationship between mothers and their children has failed to thrive in the artificially claustrophobic world of the private, nuclear family. See Forna, p.19.



experiences of motherhood against the harrowing backdrop of a society that questions long-established truths and values. Instances of other mass shootings and apparently motiveless familial murders form the fabric of Shriver's fictional world. Hence, *Kevin* is also an investigation of what it is like to mother in a postmodern era.

Shriver explores the impact of postmodern theories of, for example, the de-centred subject and of the end of totalising narratives through the breakdown of the relationship of a mother and her son. The novel employs the postmodern narrative device of deconstruction, with Eva retrospectively deconstructing the events that led to the shootings in a series of letters to her dead husband: 'I have had to go backward, to deconstruct' (*K*, p.400). Eva's use of the term deconstruction alerts the reader to the application of postmodern ideas of criticism or theory to the novel. A deconstruction is meant to undermine the frame of reference and the assumptions that underpin the text (it calls into question Eva's reliability as narrator, for example).<sup>67</sup> It highlights the subsequent undermining of values and meanings in the twenty-first century, as depicted in Shriver's novel. In *Kevin*, Eva's deconstruction of her motherhood questions our essentialist notions of mothering: that mother love is innate, instantaneous and unconditional. Fuss argues that 'deconstruction is the discourse most able to repudiate essentialism' (Fuss, p.255). However, Shriver also illustrates that deconstruction

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<sup>67</sup> Heidegger used the concept to call for the deconstruction of the history of ontology. Derrida argues that the existence of deconstructions implied that there is no intrinsic essence to a text, merely the contrast of difference. The use of deconstruction as a narrative device is central to our understanding of Shriver's fictional world, as Kevin and Eva confront a world that has been deconstructed ideologically.

knows no limits, and the “domino effect” means that questioning one set of values may lead to the undermining of our entire value system.

Both Eva and Kevin are characters who are searching for meaning in the grand scheme of things, struggling with decentralised identities. In giving birth to Kevin, Eva finds herself ‘trapped in somebody else’s story’ (*K*, p.32). Whilst Kevin, growing up in a culture that denies universal meanings, finds everything duly meaningless:

having never seen the point – of anything - he must feel brutally left out. The Spice Girls are dumb, Sony Playstations are dumb, The Titanic is dumb, mall cruising is dumb, and how could we disagree? Likewise, taking photos of the cloisters is dumb, and dancing to ‘Stairway to Heaven’ in the latter 1990s is dumb. (*K*, p.257)

The times in which Kevin lives have left him ‘spiritually ravenous’ (*K*, p.256). Eva and Franklin also suffer from the denial of ultimate truths that permeates postmodern culture, deciding to have a child in an attempt to re-inscribe meaning to lives that had ‘grown monotonous’, ‘because lately everywhere seems kind of the same’ (*K*, p.18). The moral relativism of postmodernism (that contests a hierarchical value system) can be reductive and Franklin acknowledges his desire for a child is partly due to his belief that “‘at least a kid would answer the Big Question’” (*K*, p.357).<sup>68</sup>

By becoming parents, Eva and Franklin anticipate the reinstatement of ‘love, story, content, faith in the human “thing”’ (*K*, p.27). A child for them will help to fill the ‘absolute vacancy of being’, identified

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<sup>68</sup> This flattening effect is not postmodernism’s intention.

by Foucault (White, p. 110). The expectation placed on child bearing and rearing in the twenty-first century is, therefore, greater than for previous generations: now we choose to have children, we expect a lot in return, for them to provide an answer to 'what life is for' (K, p.257): to provide our lives with meaning. Eva realises how crippling this anticipation can be for all concerned, but in particular for the child: 'he was only a little boy, and he alone was supposed to answer a Big Question that had his own father stymied. What a burden to place on the newly arrived!' (K, p.256).<sup>69</sup>

Foucault contends that our response to the 'vacancy of being' at the centre of each one of us is to 'invest, master, and fill [it] up by pure invention'.<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, the desire to self-sacrifice is perceived by Eva as part of Franklin's desire to impose meaning on his life:

You were always captivated by self-sacrifice. However admirable, your eagerness to give your life over to another person may have been due in some measure to the fact that when your life was wholly in your lap you didn't know what to do with it. Self-sacrifice was an easy way out. I know that sounds unkind. But I do believe that desperation of yours - to rid yourself of yourself, if

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. *Incendiary*, in which Jasper Black is a successful Journalist. His lover asks him "Don't you have what you want? Posh newspaper job. Aston Martin. That'd be enough for most people I should have thought" (I, p. 51). However, Black acknowledges that the outward trappings of success are not enough: "I reckon it would be different if I had a child", he said. "I reckon I'd have a hard time convincing myself that my 800 words a week were making this world better. I wrote a piece about Aids in Africa last month. I don't know anyone with Aids. I've never been to Africa. But my piece won a prize. So fuck it" (I, p.49).

<sup>70</sup> Foucault considers this void as "une lacune à étendre le plus largement possible et à mesurer méticuleusement." The "absence" at the heart of language Foucault takes to be evidence of "an absolute vacancy of being, which it is necessary to invest, master, and fill up [comblé] by pure invention", from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (1969), trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York : Routledge, 1976), pp.24-25, cited in White, p.110.

that's not too abstract, burdened our son hugely. (K, p.54)<sup>71</sup>

Eva also chooses motherhood in part to fill the void, whilst Kevin acknowledges his murderous rampage as his attempt to give his life *story*: "a story's a whole lot more than most people got. All you people watching out there, you're listening to what I say because I have something you don't: I got plot" (K, p.356).<sup>72</sup> As a de-centred subject, the novel provides very little insight into Kevin's interior life (with the one exception of his short period of illness, when Kevin reveals himself desperately in need of maternal care). This lack of insight into Kevin could be interpreted as correlative of Eva's selfishness, as the novel is narrated from her point of view. However, Kevin's lack of self can be interpreted as a comment on the times in which he lives, as opposed to solely illustrating bad mothering on Eva's part. As Eva observes, 'Kevin was a shell game in which all three cups were empty' (K, p. 234).

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<sup>71</sup> Franklin's desire to sacrifice himself for Kevin does not extend to changing his life in any significant detail. Fatherhood for him is a part-time role in addition to his freelance career.

<sup>72</sup> Ironically, it is Eva's son Kevin (in the style of Foucault's real-life case study of Pierre Rivière) who, through murdering his father and sister and classmates establishes *his* own discourse, rejecting the discourses of the establishment, refusing what Foucault identified as a "SameDifferent" definition of himself. Foucault contended that Rivière's real-life murder of his mother, sister and brother (in common with Kevin's familial murders) had social and political implications, since it raised the question of the authority of the parent over the child in the family, in the first instance, and that of the state over the citizen in the second. In setting his own discourse against all official discourses, Rivière (and Kevin) effectively claims a freedom to act however he wishes, in conformity to his own desires; and by implication he challenges the authority of society, whether vested in the family, the state, the law, science, or popular opinion, to judge him on its terms. However, despite every effort to the contrary, both Rivière (who was sectioned for life) and Kevin become inscribed with the discourses of madness, sickness, criminality, and sexuality. Kevin appreciates the symbolic importance of laying claim to his own discourse, claiming, "my story is about all I got to my name right now, and that's why I feel robbed. But a story's a whole lot more than most people got" (K, p.357). Yet, for all his vociferousness on the subject, the local *Journal News* still understands him merely in terms of 'KK turned *bad boy*' (K, p.399). Michel Foucault, "*I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister and my brother...: A case of parricide in the 19<sup>th</sup> century*", (1973), trans. by F. Jelineck (Lincoln and London: Random House, 1982). White discusses Foucault's case study (White, p.125).

Eva's mothering is thus contextualised in terms of our society and depicted as having been influenced by the ideologies of postmodernism and feminism. The novel's preoccupation with story, content, plot and the 'turning of the page' highlights what White identifies as postmodern suspicions about narrative as a 'particularly effective system of discursive meaning production' (White, p x). In *Kevin*, the characters strive to attribute meaning to their lives through narrative. Eva has a child to enter a new story, to introduce new meanings in the form of new characters: 'young people whose lives lay before them – who made *new* stories, about which [she] could have *new* opinions, and whose fabric was not threadbare from retelling' (*K*, p.24). Kevin's obsession with *Robin Hood* also forms part of this commentary on the human desire for meaning through story telling. In Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations*, Tonie's husband Thomas gives up his job to search for 'authenticity' (*BV*, p.1). Struggling to find meaning in reality, he takes comfort from his daughter Alexa's story books: 'in her books he finds explanations for everything, for love and survival, struggle and pleasure, happiness and grief, for belief, for the shape and the arc of life itself' (*BV*, p.8).

White observes that one would anticipate that postmodernism would, as part of its efforts to reveal universal meanings as meaningless, reject narrativity (as did literary modernism before it), thus illustrating 'that real life can never be truthfully represented as having the kind of formal coherency met with in the conventional, well-made or fabulistic story' (White, p.ix). It was Barthes who originally contended that, between our experience of the world and our efforts to describe that

experience in language, narrative 'ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted'.<sup>73</sup> And it would therefore follow that the absence of narrative capacity or a refusal of narrative indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself. However, it is generally acknowledged that postmodernism is 'informed by a programmatic, if ironic, commitment to the return to narrative as one of its enabling presuppositions' (White, p xi).<sup>74</sup>

Eva's yearning for story is, however, more than a nod by Shriver to postmodernism's ironic return to narrative. The characters of mother and son are expressions of humanity's deep desire for meaning. Postmodernist 'cultural critics have commented on the death of the great "master narratives" that formerly provided precognitive bases of belief' (White, p.xi). Yet contemporary writers, when confronted by the postmodernist challenge to universal meanings and beliefs, continue to strive to ascribe to motherhood 'the formal coherency that only stories possess' (White, p.20). It is significant that the authors and autobiographers discussed in this study write about motherhood using traditional narrative techniques.<sup>75</sup> Child birth and child rearing appear to

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<sup>73</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', cited in White (p.2).

<sup>74</sup> Postmodernism returned to traditional narrative as part of its reaction against modernism, as well as to highlight how effective narrativity is at producing meaning.

<sup>75</sup> David Parker claims in *Renegotiating Ethics* that 'post-structuralism seemed to be antipathetic in several significant ways to any interest in what would seem the most obvious ethical dimension of literature, that is to say, the narrative or dramatic presentation of moral questions, dilemmas, embodied in characters, imagined agents, lives, selves or subjectivities. Deconstruction ruled out such moral interest in at least two ways. First, it has insisted that literary meaning is finally undecidable, so the very notion of determinate "moral questions" or "dilemmas" is defeated in the end by the instabilities within language itself. Secondly, deconstruction has presented the inner life of moral deliberation/intentionality and choice not as something prior to language but as a mere effect of language' (Parker, p.8).

be central to our need to 'put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time' (White, p.11).

White's allusion to the 'destructive power of time' forms part of his discussion of the work of Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). For Ricoeur,

the meaning of history resides in its aspect as a drama of the human effort to endow life with meaning. This universal, human quest for meaning is carried out in the awareness of the corrosive power of time.<sup>76</sup>

In particular, White asserts that Ricoeur 'grants to fictional narrativity a capacity to represent a deeper insight into the "human experience of temporality" than does either its historical or mythical counterparts' (White, p.171). The proliferation of stories of birth and child rearing at the beginning of the twenty-first century is, in part, an antidote to a culture that denies meaning in general terms: specifically, childbirth is the only challenge available to man to counter the corrosive power of time. Eva alludes to the importance played by the tragic vision of our own mortality in making her decision to have a child:

I'm not sure I want to spend [my life] looking over my shoulder at a generation whose lineage I'm personally helping to truncate. There's something nihilistic about not having children, Franklin. As if you don't believe

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<sup>76</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 1*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 38, cited in White (p.171).

in the whole human thing. (*K*, p.24)

Stories of birth and child rearing reaffirm our belief in 'the whole human thing' (*K*, p.27). Yet, the cultural moment that makes it imperative for us to re-state this belief also deconstructs many of the myths on which these beliefs were based. Whether one regards postmodernism as an important critical concept or merely an overused and often misunderstood *buzzword*, it is not postmodernism's challenge to a specific theory, value or belief that has been its most significant contribution to the twenty-first century. Postmodernism has succeeded in creating a general cultural tone of scepticism, challenge and criticism. It has produced an intellectual environment where nothing is sacred, where all existing perceptions of what has gone before it are to be questioned, critiqued and reinvestigated.

Strip away romantic notions of love at first sight and ideas of the noble sacrifice of one's own desires for the sake of the child, and contemporary representations of motherhood can become a mixture of the meaningless, brutal and banal - like Kevin's story. As demonstrated by *Kevin*, if one follows certain aspects of postmodern thought through to their logical conclusion, there is potential for nihilism and anarchy. The world can be viewed as Kevin perceives it: Eva acknowledges that she is 'disheartened to report that whenever [she] saw the world through Kevin's eyes, it tended to appear unusually dreary. Though Kevin's eyes the whole world looked like Africa, people milling and scrounging and squatting and lying down to die' (*K*, p.117). Eva theorises that perhaps



Kevin's murderous actions are the result of society's focus on self and acquisition, and his suspicion that

this is as good as it gets. Your big house. His good school. I think it is very difficult for kids these days, in a way. The country's very prosperity has become a burden, a dead end. Everything works, doesn't it? At least if you're white and middle class. So it must often seem to young people that they're not needed. In a sense, as if there's nothing for them to do. Except tear it apart. (K, p.334)

In imagining how things could be different, we have, in part, imagined a world without meaning. Cleave's *Incendiary* offers a similar apocalyptic vision to Shriver's, with London in a state of emergency following a successful attack on the Arsenal football stadium by suicide bombers. London is under nightly curfew with 'helicopters circling overhead and flashing light out in all directions' (I, p.159). Its population is terrorised: 'it was like we all became animals again. You could look at people on the bus and you'd almost see the fur bristling under their nice clean clothes. After the May Day [suicide bombings] everyone was nervous' (I, p.163).

*Incendiary* is a commentary on a perceived loss of values in the twenty-first century as Cleave depicts a consumer society driven by ideas of personal freedoms and terrorised by the nihilistic actions of persons unknown.<sup>77</sup> His depiction of contemporary society is knowingly

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<sup>77</sup> In *The Terror Dream*, Faludi takes issue with the apparent fixation of the American press that women were returning to the traditional stay-at-home-mother position, following the 9/11 terror attack on the Twin Towers. However, she argues that the much predicted baby boom never happened, because the back-to-the-nest story simply wasn't

*postmodern*, poking fun at certain postmodern affectations such as pastiche and the ironic pursuit of the *authentic*. Jasper Black, successful journalist, appraises the girls in his social circle in these terms:

They paint canvases. Mainly post representational. They're very Hoxton. They're the kind of girls who'll talk about football and cook you something ghastly like eel pie. Which one is expected to find deliciously ironic. Rather than actually delicious if you see what I mean. (*I*, p. 42).

His attraction to the working class mother in the story is that, by contrast with his own friends, she appears 'very real' (*I*, p.43): living in a council high-rise flat, cooking him fish fingers and microwave chips. For Jasper, this married woman with one son offers him an insight into a life lived with meaning he feels his own existence lacks. However, she is quick to point out that her working class experience is no more meaningful than his: 'you had a lot to learn about the Wellington Estate. Round here they wouldn't piss on themselves if they were on fire let alone the neighbours' (*I*, p.202).

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true. 'The terrorist attack had shocked us into a new faith in our oldest values', *Time* pronounced. 'It was time for homecoming and housecleaning'. Faludi contests these assertions, asserting that 'Americans did not have to change their private behaviour, they just had to subscribe to a sanctioned fantasy [...] what mattered was restoring the illusion of a mythic America where women needed men's protection and men succeeded in providing it'. Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream* (New York: Picador, 2007). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/feb/20/usa.world> [accessed 24 April 2011]. Following Kevin's murder spree, Eva in *Kevin* acknowledges a similar reaction: 'much belittled in the sixties, wholesomeness is a property I have come to appreciate as surprisingly scarce' (*K*, p.8).

Cleave connects selfishness, our *me-culture*, with a loss of meaning.<sup>78</sup> After the bombing of the Arsenal stadium, no-one, not even Jasper's girlfriend Petra, telephones to check if he escaped the blast:

Everyone I know is cold and heartless. Nobody rang me that night to see if I was Okay. And you know why? Because I am a fucking cold heartless cunt too [...] you said I didn't have a selfless *bone* in my body. But it amounts to the same thing. My life is pointless. I have the kind of friends who aren't that curious whether or not I have been destroyed by suicide bombers. Still. There's always cocaine. (*I*, p. 109)

The bomb at the stadium exposes the superficiality of today's misplaced values. The story is told from the perspective of the working class mother (and Jasper's occasional lover), who loses her husband and son in the blast. Without her family, the pursuit of money, status and things is thrown into sharp relief:

A woman in my position could wallpaper her flat with money it wouldn't make a difference. It's all just pictures of the queen to me. Without my boy to spend it on that's all your precious money is, Petra. Crappy little pictures of the queen. (*I*, p.281)

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<sup>78</sup> Cusk recalls a review of her memoir *A Life's Work* that identified her (and her mothering) as a product of this *Me* generation. It accused the author of being 'a self-obsessed bore: the embodiment of the Me! Me! Me! attitude which you so resent in small children. And everything those children say or do is - in your mind - really about you. Sooner or later, you'll end up in family therapy, because it has never occurred to you that it might be an idea to simply bring up children to be happy, or to consider happiness as an option for yourself [...] talk about navel gazing'. Cusk, 'I was only being honest'.

Her bereavement also calls into question her former pursuit of self: 'I used to wish I had a moment of time to myself. And now that I do have time to myself, it's the last thing I want' (*I*, p.99). Jasper is watching football with her at her flat as the stadium bursts into flames, a moment which proves to be a revelation for him:

Your poor little face when you started to realise. That's horror. You realising you had no one left to grill fish fingers for. That's what it all boils down to after all the politicking and the posturing and the 800 balanced words from pompous cunts like me. Horror. (*I*, p.248)

The novel is a discussion about the nature of sacrifice, from the sacrifice of the suicide bombers to the degree of self-sacrifice demanded in motherhood. *Incendiary* links self-sacrifice to the production of meaning as demonstrated through the character of Jasper who at last ascribes his life with meaning through his own act of self-sacrifice at the end of the novel. In conjunction with the boy's mother, he attempts to expose the fact that the British authorities knew in advance that the May Day bombings at the stadium were going to happen. He attempts to break the story live, threatening to blow up the Houses of Parliament unless he is allowed to speak. However, before he manages to say his piece to camera, he is fatally shot by undercover police. His co-conspirator, the dead boy's mother, watches these events as they unfold live on television. Although Jasper has been thwarted in his mission, she notes a 'great big smile [that] comes over his face as he's falling' (*I*, p.305). He obviously finds the meaning he has craved throughout the

story through his own act of self-sacrifice on behalf of her murdered son.<sup>79</sup>

Both *Incendiary* and *Kevin* are thus discussions of the moral question about the extent to which selfishness denies meaning. After his murder spree, Kevin's prison therapist 'diagnosed him with "empathic deficiency"' (K, p.56). Eva too, demonstrates a lack of empathy toward the helpless infant in her charge, acknowledging to her ex-nanny that 'I realise this doesn't sound very nice. But I keep waiting for the emotional payoff': to which the nanny responds, 'but only by giving do you get something back' (K, p.102). These novels prompt the question: is achieving one's own discourse a selfish and potentially destructive act?

Both *Incendiary* and *Kevin* also connect the selfishness demonstrated by the *me-generation* with the potential to subvert our traditional, sentimental preconceptions of motherhood into a horror story.<sup>80</sup> Central to Cleave's nihilistic vision of London is a child blown to pieces by a suicide bomber. As with *Kevin*, the child's meaning has changed from the more traditional, twentieth-century bringer of life and

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<sup>79</sup> The moral worth attributed to self-sacrifice has persisted. In Weldon's novel *Puffball*, Liffey gives birth and she fantasises that she can hear her baby reprove her "'only by giving away your life, do you save it'" (P, p.264).

<sup>80</sup> A distinction needs to be made here with regard to the word 'horror' as discussed in chapter one. Lessing describes her novel *The Fifth Child* as 'a classic horror story'. Ben is depicted as horrific because he is as not of this world. Harriet 'watched Ben [...] and tried to imagine him among a group of his own kind, squatting in the mouth of a cave around roaring flames [...] no, Ben's people were at home under the earth, she was sure, deep underground in black caverns' (FC, p.146). The horrific aspect of Kevin is that he is depicted as a product of the twenty-first century. He is not a figure of fantasy and Shriver's fiction was in part inspired by actual events, such as the Columbine massacre.

love to harbinger of doom and destruction. Here, Cleave describes the deceased Jasper's unborn child inside his girlfriend Petra's stomach.<sup>81</sup>

It heard its mum's heart beating and each beat made it flinch like a nail bomb going off in the distance. Its little fists were closed tight and the umbilical cord was pumping it full of petrol. It was an incendiary child and when it dreamed it dreamed of sparks. (*I*, p.279)

By questioning the sentimental portrait of motherhood's pleasures, the ideologies of postmodernism and feminism have (like Kevin, the embodiment of many of postmodernism's tenets) taken 'away [our] easy answer, [our] cheating, slipshod shorthand for what life is for' (*K*, p.257). These resisting texts, in attempting to illuminate the negative aspects of mothering in today's society, have subverted, to differing degrees, stories of joy and meaning to those of nihilism and horror. Commenting on her own biographical portrayal of motherhood in 2001, Cusk acknowledges that 'I am certain that my own reaction, three years ago, to the book I have now written would have been to wonder why the author had bothered to have children in the first place if she thought it was so awful' (*ALW*, p.4). There is popular concern, therefore, that literature which challenges the sentimental portrayal of motherhood might deter women

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<sup>81</sup> Petra is the epitome of selfishness throughout the story. As Life-Style Editor for the *Sunday Telegraph* she embodies society's preoccupation with meaningless things and status. It is she who informs the authorities of both her boyfriend and friend's intention of making the truth about Mayday known, in exchange for a promotion. Significantly, she is the only survivor of this tragedy to go forward into the future and her pregnancy positions her as custodian of the next generation, reflecting something of Cleave's bleak vision.

from having children. Reviewing Cusk's memoir, Jane Shilling expresses her fear that, 'mother[s]-to-be [might find the book] rather frightening'.<sup>82</sup>

Yet, Freely contends that Cusk's memoir is still 'a love story, by the way, but a love story denuded of all sentimental comforts'.<sup>83</sup> Simpson best describes what contemporary authors are attempting to articulate through their representations of motherhood: 'it's not not wonderful, but it's more complex than that, and richer' (Crewe, p.24). These authors wish to debunk 'the stupid culture of motherhood that doesn't legislate for complexity and doesn't allow you to express yourself'.<sup>84</sup> By resisting the sentimental, they hope to identify motherhood's authentic subjective pleasures. Yet this is in itself problematic. These examples reveal how difficult it can be to differentiate between what constitutes a genuine, individual pleasure from that of a deeply rooted, internalised response to those cultural, social, political and religious codes that hem us in. Whether or not the efforts of those currently writing about the mother will merely amount to a renewed, although different, sentimentalising motherhood discourse, only time will tell. It bears repeating that postmodernism has indeed taken away our 'easy answer, [our] cheating, slipshod shorthand for what life is for' (K, p.257). It is not surprising that representations of motherhood in the twenty-first century are central to our current dilemma over the *meaning* of life.

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<sup>82</sup> Jane Shilling, 'How Babies Change Your Life', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 26 August 2001 <<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-19195132.html>> [accessed 14 April 2011]

<sup>83</sup> Freely, 'The Myth of Motherhood'.

<sup>84</sup> Freely, 'The Myth of Motherhood'.

### Chapter Three – Motherhood and Sex: Guilty Pleasures

At the time of writing *Motherhood and Representation* in 1992, Kaplan contended that there was 'a lack of cultural discourses setting forth women's subjective pleasures in mothering (apart from such pleasures taking place under the auspices of the father or the state)' and that this area 'has still not been adequately studied' (Kaplan, p.4). This chapter considers Kaplan's contention, examining depictions of mother-child physical intimacy in the fiction and memoir dating from 1995-2010, studied for this thesis. Initial investigations revealed that portraits of physical closeness and sensuality between mother and child are not as prominent as one would anticipate. This chapter explores this lack of representation, and analyses various possible explanations. The dearth in representation of physical intimacy may be the result of the decreased emphasis being placed on describing the mother-child relationship in general, the increased awareness of sexual abuse, or it may indicate a move away from previously widely accepted psychological depictions of the mother-child relationship in the literary imagination.

From a critical perspective, therefore, the 'fantasy of oneness' (Parker, R., p.27) is considered an integral feature of the maternal ideal together with the psychological discourses that have legitimised the notion of a symbiotic union between mother and child, from Freud's individuation theory to later feminist interventionist readings of Freud, with particular reference to the work of Nancy Chodorow and Janice Radway.



The discussion considers the extent to which existing psychological opinions in mother/child Oedipal relations are represented in the literary imagination, whilst presenting new evidence to suggest that millennium fiction is moving away from depictions of mother-child fusion and Freudian interpretations of the mother. The larger debate on the problematic nature of female sexuality within motherhood is also explored.

### **Family Intimacy and Sensuality in the Mother-Child Relationship**

The mother in Cleave's *Incendiary* relishes the closeness of family life: 'I've [...] got a family and I love them. All I need for the rest of my life is to fall asleep with them every night and wake up with them every morning' (I, p.51). Emotional and physical intimacy is what most mothers probably hope for from their families, with the child as a shared project of both mother and father, born of their love, and cementing their relationship. In particular, Chase and Rogers assert in *Mothers & Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives*, that the mother's relationship with her child is looked forward to as one of unique 'mutual attunement, emotional intensity, playful delight, diffuse eroticism, departures and returns' (Chase and Rogers, p.132). In popular culture, having a child is represented as an opportunity for a woman to experience human engagement at its most intense and rewarding: a relationship of unprecedented intimacy and bonding. In *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* Rozsika Parker argues that part of the myth of motherhood is the idealisation of 'a relationship of unproblematic unity'

(Parker, R., p.42). Yet portraits of physical closeness and sensuality are less prominent than one would anticipate in depictions of family life in turn of this century fiction and memoir, and the examples of such intimacy discussed in this chapter are the exception, rather than the rule. Lack of focus on physical intimacy between mother and child may be a result of the decreased emphasis placed on describing the mother-child relationship which is here identified, or there may be a more sinister contributory factor at work.

### **The Spectre at the Family Feast – Sexual Abuse**

Until the 1960s sexual abuse of children was not discussed socially because it was not, in Judith Butler's terms, 'culturally intelligible'.<sup>1</sup>

Family intimacy, therefore, went largely unchallenged. With the growing permissiveness of the last century, sex has been brought into the public domain and society can now articulate what is deemed to be appropriate sexual behaviour and what may constitute abuse. Here, the mother in *Incendiary* reflects on changing sexual mores during her lifetime:

when I get nervous about all the horrible things in the world  
I just need something very soft and warm to make me forget  
for a bit. I didn't even know what it was till I was 14. It was  
one of my mum's boyfriends who showed me but I won't  
write his name or he'll get into trouble. I suppose he was a  
SICK CHILD PREDATOR but I still remember how lovely  
it felt. (*I*, p.13)

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.147.

This mother is far from traumatised by this her first (underage) sexual encounter and recalls it as both nurturing and relaxing. Her memory of this experience is a happy one, one that lifted life's trials and tribulations from her young shoulders, albeit temporarily: 'I just smiled and looked out at the hard faces and the homeless drifting past the car windows and they didn't bother me for the moment. I was just smiling and thinking nothing much' (*I*, p.13). However, the character's reluctance to give her sexual partner's name and her use of capitalisation and tabloid terminology reveals that she is now aware of how this encounter would be considered. She cannot articulate this memory openly as public awareness of what constitutes abuse is now far more acute as sexual abuse of children is now common currency in the media and popular culture.

Changes in attitudes to sex and the discourses of sexual behaviour which were revolutionised in the 1960s are well-documented. Strictly enforced taboos curtailing sexual liberty have, for the most part, been swept away in our epoch of transgression. In Shriver's *Kevin*, Kevin is far more knowledgeable and open about sex than children of previous generations. When her son is seven, Eva attempts to explain to her son how she has become pregnant with her second child: 'I had barely introduced the subject while making dinner when Kevin interrupted me impatiently, "is this about fucking"' (*K*, p.217). During a restaurant dinner some years later, Kevin, not yet sixteen, litters his conversation with his mother with references to "'some cute little cunt"' (*K*, p.275). Sex is no longer taboo in our society, no longer a secret, as Eva

acknowledges: '*the secret is there is no secret*' (K, p.148). The novel suggests that our postmodern, permissive attitude to sex has the potential to reduce our sexual relationships to mere biological necessity, to strip this aspect of our lives of meaning:

when we shrouded our grown-up mysteries for which Kevin was too young, we implicitly promised him that when the time came, the curtain would pull back to reveal – what? Like the ambiguous emotional universe that I imagined awaited me on the other side of childbirth, it's doubtful that Kevin had formed a vivid picture of whatever we had withheld from him. But the one thing he could not have imagined is that we were withholding nothing. That there was nothing on the other side of our silly rules, *nothing*. (K, p.146)<sup>2</sup>

It is ironic, then, that the sexual openness now practised by many (including twenty-first century children) has paradoxically been instrumental in restricting physical intimacy within family life. For society has failed to distinguish clearly between the erotic, sensual element of the mother-child relationship and that of child abuse, so that hitherto pleasurable and innocent aspects of family life have become the subject of suspicion. An exhibition by the American photographer Tierney Gearon (at the Saatchi Gallery in March 2001) which featured pictures of

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<sup>2</sup> In *Kevin*, Shriver portrays the postmodern era as lacking in meaning, or rather, lacking in the *old* meanings. The lifting of taboos around sex equates for some with the negation of the content of the experience. *Kevin* investigates the difficulties inherent in making a transition to a freer (with regard to what has traditionally constrained us) way of being. Eva envisages nothing but disappointment for her son, 'watching those stupid films and logging on to those stupid websites, swigging that stupid hooch and sucking those stupid butts and fucking those stupid school girls, Kevin must have felt so fiercely cheated' (K, p.148).

her children playing naked on the beach and posing in masks was the subject of a police investigation, following complaints from the general public. The then culture Minister Chris Smith was forced to intervene on Gearon's behalf, chastising the police for their inability to distinguish between 'probity and censorship'.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the fear of public censure, therefore, the physical intimacy and erotic energy of the mother-child relationship has become, according to Chase and Rogers, 'an underreported and under-recognised dimension of many women's mothering' (Chase and Rogers, p.132). They argue that an aspect of mothering that can be intensely pleasurable and rewarding for both mother and child has become off-limits: a subjective pleasure of motherhood is being distorted into a guilty secret. In 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', Lorde argues that either to deny or disguise the sensual aspect of the mother-child relationship is, 'however comfortable that might seem [...] to deny a large part of the experience' (Lorde, p.59).<sup>4</sup>

One such denial is illustrated in Gemmell's story, 'Tales of the Recent Past': 'a man at a party tells me he travels the length of London to smell a newborn's head. It is the most powerful, *non-erotic* human

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<sup>3</sup> A similar furore surrounded Annelies Sturba's controversial picture of her twelve-year-old daughter in the bath in 2002. Despite the picture's already having been published in a book and exhibited in several European galleries without complaint, Scotland Yard got so far as to send their file on the case to the Crown Prosecution Service for a decision as to whether or not to prosecute the Rhodes & Mann Gallery in Shoreditch. Fiachra Gibbons, 'Gallery faces prosecution over picture of girl in the bath', *Guardian*, 18 December 2002 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/2002/dec/18/arts.childprotection>> [accessed 12 December 2011]

It is also now common practice for schools to request parents to restrict photographs of their children's nativity plays and sports days to their own children, unless they have permission from the parents of the other children taking part in the event.

<sup>4</sup> Chase and Rogers cite Lorde's work in their chapter entitled 'Mothers, Sexuality and Eros' in *Mothers & Children*, pp.115 -143 (p.119).

experience, he tells me, it is pancakes and Vanilla and skin' (*GA*, p.214). The reader is told emphatically that the experience is 'non-erotic', and neither is it intellectual nor rational. It is gratifying on a physical level, a sensual pleasure. Similarly, in Pearson's novel *How She Does It*, Kate carefully legitimises the strength of her physical longing for her children by contextualising it as the result of missing her children during her working day: 'I really want to be with my children. Some nights, if I get home too late for Emily's bedtime, I go to the laundry basket and I Smell Their Clothes' (*HSD*, p.20)

In Myerson's novel *Something*, Tess also relishes the smell of her children, despite her young son's fingers smelling, as he pats her face tenderly, of 'heat and cheese' (*SMH*, p.75). Myerson does not foreground Tess's physical desire for her children, yet *smell* is covertly sexual: the only other notable relationship where human beings seek out the smell of another is in the smell of a lover. In fact, Myerson later confirms the connection between smell and sex during a sexual encounter between Tess and her husband Mick. His penis, apparently 'smells of spit and cheese and the hotness of men before sex' (*SMH*, p.141). By not openly acknowledging that certain mother-child experiences can be erotic, some of the complexity and energy of the relationship is lost, resulting in a potential cycle of guilt and repression on the part of the mother.

Only Elizabeth, the grandmother in Gregory's *The Little House*, situates her pleasure in her new-born grandson within the realms of erotic experience: 'Elizabeth inhaled the addictive scent of newborn baby. "Little love", she whispered. "My little love" (*LH*, p.70). However,

Elizabeth's longing is portrayed as suspect and inappropriate, for she is greedily lusting after her daughter-in-law's newborn baby. Gregory represents Elizabeth's sensuous enjoyment of the baby in terms similar to that of the wicked witch in fairy stories, suggesting, therefore, that this desire is evil.<sup>5</sup> Little by little, Elizabeth manages to exclude her daughter-in-law from the family group, so that she can have all the Cleary men, including her *son* and *grandson*, to herself. Elizabeth is depicted as the type of woman who not only wants to breathe children in, but who would not be satisfied until she *gobbles them up*. Elizabeth's guileless husband Frederick comments affectionately on his wife's seemingly magical powers of manipulation: "Granny Cleary did a spell and they all lived happily ever after" (*LH*, p.116).

### **A Vocabulary Tainted by Taboo**

Sensual reactions to children have become increasingly covert because of the suspicion that these reactions may also be sexual and predatory. The current cultural confusion surrounding this aspect of the mother-child relationship is highlighted by the fact that Chase and Rogers themselves feel compelled to issue this caveat to their discussion on the subject: 'we argue confidently that the mother-child eroticism we address here is an utterly distinct phenomenon from child abuse' (Chase and Rogers, p.123). Language itself has become tainted by the current cultural concern over sexual abuse and, therefore, no longer provides the means to describe such natural intimacy. The Oxford English Dictionary defines

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<sup>5</sup> *The Little House* borrows much from the fairy tale genre, with Elizabeth luring her son and his new family to live in a little cottage deep in the forest, close to her own home, but far from the outside world and assistance.

the word 'erotic' in purely sexual terms, whilst 'sensual' and 'sensuous' are also defined as 'arousing sexual or other physical gratification' (*OED*). Chase and Rogers observe that, 'cultural imagery can narrow the field of one's possible experiences by providing no respectable space for certain experiences and by withholding the vocabulary necessary for articulating such experiences' (Chase and Rogers, p.120). They believe it is necessary to open their debate on mother-child eroticism with an 'enlarged' definition of the erotic, to create a 'theoretical space for understanding the cultural wedge commonly driven between motherhood and sexuality' and to 'understand the joys and fulfilment that motherhood holds for many, perhaps most, women' (Chase and Rogers, p.120). They, therefore, adopt Lorde's interpretation of the word erotic, linking it with the spiritual and in so doing making it

an arena of sensual experiences intense enough to evoke deeply physical, emotional, and self-expressive feelings all at the same time [...] at least momentarily, the erotic blends intense experiences of transcendence and embodiment. (Chase and Rogers, p.119)<sup>6</sup>

Chase and Rogers argue that we need an expanded definition of eroticism 'if we are to resist the maternal guilt and shame that so often impinge on women's relationships with their children' (Chase and Rogers, p.121).

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Millett's connection of transcendence with Lawrence's depiction of sexual orgasm: she says of Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* that 'having achieved this transcendence through Clara's [sexual] offices, he finds it convenient to dismiss her' (Millett, p.255).



## Literature and the Exploration of Guilty Pleasures

However, one of the attested virtues of literature is its capacity to express what is often considered to be inexpressible in other discourses.

Literature is considered a unique medium in being able to provide a safe environment to explore the risqué or forbidden. In "Returning to Manderley": Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class', Alison Light asserts that fiction offers women 'unique opportunities for reader-power, for an imaginary control of the uncontrollable'.<sup>7</sup> The subtleties of literary knowledge should be better suited than other discourses to opening up complex and delicate areas of debate, offering an unparalleled insight into the mother's most secret interior life, revealing desires that would elude empirical/evidence-based studies of the real life mother.<sup>8</sup> For literature creates a space where Nancy Wood's conjectured meeting of the 'social and the psychical mother [can] coincide' (Kaplan, p.31).<sup>9</sup> Chase and Rogers concede that 'depictions of mother-child eroticism sometimes show up in novels, cultural forms that provide a relatively safe space for expressing and exploring experiences relegated to the margins of culture' (Chase and Rogers, p.121). Yet this freedom is not exercised to any significant degree in this sample of literature, dating from 1995 onwards.

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<sup>7</sup> Alison Light, "Returning to Manderley": Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class', *Feminist Review*, 16 (1984), p.15.

<sup>8</sup> White observes that Fredric Jameson 'like Sartre, [...] considered the task of making sense of Necessity as too important to be consigned to the faculty of reason alone. It is rather to the imagination that this task is to be consigned, more specifically to the narrative capacities of the imagination'. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), Chapter 1. Cited in White, p.148.

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan cites the work of Nancy Wood, 'L'Ane Dossier: An Introduction', *m/f: A Feminist Journal*, 8 (1983), 17-21.

Simpson is one of the few writers to touch upon the sensual element of mothering in her short story, 'Hey Yeah', but she opts for an implicit portrayal. The story includes this vignette of early morning waking:

the three children shoved and biffed their way into shares of her supine body. Robin clung to his central stake, arms round her neck, head between her breasts, kicking out at attempts to supplant him. Martin hooked his legs round her waist and lay under her left arm gnawing his nails and complaining it wasn't fair. Maxine burrowed at her right side, all elbows and knees, until she settled in the crook of her other arm, her head beside Dorrie's on the pillow. (HY, p.23)

The language of closeness in this extract (with the description of the physical positions sought and jealously guarded) is reminiscent of adult sexual behaviour. Significantly, however, this passage provides a description only; Simpson chooses not to tell us how Dorrie feels when Robin puts his head between her breasts and Martin encircles her waist with his legs. It is also interesting that Maxine, as the daughter, achieves the least provocative position in relation to her mother, perhaps intimating further reservations concerning the depiction of same-gender sensuality.

In the same story, Simpson's most explicit representation of the sexual element of the mother-child relationship again takes the form of description only, although this time Dorrie's sexual relationship with her husband Max is depicted simultaneously with that of her relationship with her son Robin:

Max stirred and muttered something. 'Ssssh,' said Robin, placing a forefinger against his mother's lips and widening his eyes for emphasis. They watched Max's dark bearded face break into a yawn ... he was waking up. Robin wriggled under the bedclothes to hide. Last night it had been her under the bedclothes and Max's hands on her head while she brought him off with her mouth [...] next, gently unwinding herself from his knotty embrace she had glided along to the next room and plucked this heavy boy from his bed, standing him, sleep-dazed, in front of the lavatory, pointing the shrimp of his penis for him, whispering encouragement as the water hissed. (HY, p. 22)

Dorrie, as wife and mother, is intimately involved with both her husband's and her son's penis, and she is aware of the incongruity inherent in her night-time ministrations. The conspiratorial adultery with Robin is suggested in this scene and Dorrie's awareness of her duality between wife and mother brings with it an unavoidable complicity between mother and son which could, potentially, bestow an additional sexual frisson on her relationship with Robin. 'Hey Yeah' thus highlights the difficulties that Chase and Rogers posit in distinguishing between 'motherly affection and female passion' (Chase and Rogers, p.137). By intertwining adult sexuality with mothering Simpson evokes the tensions that surround female sexuality and motherhood but does so without having to comment or analyse. Implicitly commenting on the existence of a sexual aspect to the mother-child relationship, she makes her point by showing not telling.

The sexual aspect of the mother-child bond is, then, suggested rather than debated in 'Hey Yeah', *How She Does It* and *Something*

*Might Happen*. When Tess's son in *Something Might Happen* tells his mother "you're so beautiful" she responds by kissing 'the soft skin next to his eyes where the freckles spill over so enthusiastically you can't believe he will one day be a man and shave and have serious, grown up thoughts' (*SMH*, p.75). Tess's awareness of her son as a man-in-waiting is an intrinsic factor in the intimate nature of these mother-child encounters, yet is not foregrounded. The complicity that mothers inevitably experience is a consequence of a culture that Chase and Rogers contend 'revolves heavily around the chaste mother and the innocent child', one which presupposes 'that chastity and innocence are incompatible with erotic experiences' (Chase and Rogers, p.120).

Lynda Marin observes in 'Mother and Child: The Erotic Bond' that 'many people of other cultures and classes don't operate with these same taboos', and thus by implication cannot be sullied by association with them.<sup>10</sup> Chase and Rogers argue from a feminist position, asserting that taboos restricting the sensual and erotic aspect of the mother-child relationship are the politics of oppression. They point out that 'in only one institutional arena [does] the containment of sex persist. The institution of motherhood remain[s] a desexualised stronghold undercutting women's sexual agency' (Chase and Rogers, p.116). Eva in *Kevin* consciously attempts to debunk this de-sexualisation. As part of a campaign geared towards achieving a better relationship with her son, she takes Kevin out alone to dinner. She dresses attractively for the occasion in her 'hot-pink silk dress', only to be reprimanded immediately by her husband, Franklin:

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<sup>10</sup> Lynda Marin, 'Mother and Child: The Erotic Bond', in *Mothers Journeys: Feminists Write about Mothering*, (Minneapolis: Spinsters Ink, 1994). Marin's essay is included in Chase and Rogers, pp.134-43.

"Wow" [he] said. "You're not looking very maternal [...] that slit up the thigh is cut pretty high. You don't want to make him uneasy". "I'm making someone uneasy, obviously", Eva retorts (K, p.274).

Cultural opinion presupposes that the discourses that impose such a rigid code of conduct upon women and their children exist, ostensibly, to prevent incest. Roy refers to these rules in *The God of Small Things* as 'the blood laws'. These laws, according to the character of Rahel, 'lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam and jelly jelly' (GST, p.31). Indeed, there is a valid argument to be made that children must be afforded a degree of protection from their mothers as the mother is in a unique position to exploit her child: she is trusted above all others. Lawrence, for example, informs us in *Sons and Lovers* that 'nothing [Mrs Morel] ever did, no movement she ever made, could have been found fault with by her children' (SL, p.54) and that, 'Paul had already heard his mother's views, and as these were as yet his own, he argued for her' (SL, p.117). Lawrence depicts Mrs Morel's relationship with her young sons as one in which she has the power to manipulate her children to fulfil her purpose. If her purpose were sexual, her children would be vulnerable.

However, society's preoccupation with sexual abuse is out of proportion with the number of reported cases involving mothers.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the strength of the taboo reflects society's difficulty in decreeing the point at which a mother's sexual knowledge (rather than her actions)

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<sup>11</sup> See D. Finkelhor and D. Russell, 'Women as Perpetrators' in *Child Sexual Abuse, New Theory and Research* (New York: Free Press, 1984), pp.171-85.

becomes exploitative of the child's lack of sexual knowledge. Another, even greater, difficulty for society is to acknowledge that, for children, chastity and innocence are *not* incompatible with erotic experiences. Indeed, children are often the instigators of erotic play with their parents. In *Small Things*, for example, eight-year-old Rahel enjoys an afternoon nap with her mother, Ammu, and playfully puts 'her mouth on Ammu's stomach and suck[s] at it, pulling the soft flesh into her mouth and drawing her head back to admire the shining oval of spit and the faint red imprint of her teeth on her mother's skin' (*GST*, p.221). Rahel revels in the intimate, sensual and erotic nature of this encounter, whilst at the same time remaining ignorant of the adult connotations of giving her mother a 'love bite'. Roy's portrayal of this scene is more overtly sensual than the depictions cited earlier, in keeping with the heat and the exotic sensuality of the novel's foreign setting. But, Roy presupposes that children do not experience 'passion or desire':

Ammu wondered at the transparency of that kiss. It was a clear-as-glass kiss. Unclouded by passion or desire – that pair of dogs that sleep so soundly inside children, waiting for them to grow up. It was a kiss that demanded no kiss-back. (*GST*, p.221)

The taboo, therefore, appears to be so deeply ingrained that even in fiction the depiction of the desire of children for their parents is often avoided. At this point, it is important to clarify the distinction being drawn between innocent desire and experienced desire. Desire, itself, remains innocent whilst outside the context of sexual experience.

Overt depictions of desire between mothers and their children have become increasingly problematic since the idea of sexual abuse became culturally prevalent (dating from the 1980s onwards). Yet perversely, there remains a brief period in the mother-child relationship where intense physical intimacy remains culturally tolerated: during those early weeks of life, when the child is at its most vulnerable. It is noticeable that Gemmell's description of mother-child sensuality in 'Tales of the Recent Past' in *Gas and Air* is more unequivocal than the other fictional examples of mothers with older children instanced here, although she, too, sidesteps the debate, choosing not to describe what the mother thinks about this degree of co-mingling with her newborn child. Here, the mother openly describes her baby as a lover:

soaked in my fingers, nails, skin, clothes, sheets, hair.  
The smell of your sour milky breath, the palms of your  
hands, the powdery folds of your groin. We sleep as  
close as lovers, my arm round you, face to face, and  
my nipples drip watery, blue milk. (GA, p.224)

This passage shares the sentiment found in T. S. Eliot's poem, 'A Dedication to my Wife' which pays homage to the pleasures of adult intimacy and passion:

And the rhythm that governs the repose of our sleepingtime  
The breathing in unison

Of lovers whose bodies smell of each other  
Who think the same thoughts without need of speech

And babble the same speech without need of meaning.<sup>12</sup>

By evoking Eliot's poem Gemmell is equating adult passion to a mother's passion for her baby, and her story is thus informed by the poem as it explores a newborn's ability to communicate with its mother in intimate and covert ways, similar to the coded communication between lovers. Yet we are culturally conditioned to 'think of a mother's delight in the softness of her child's skin, the firmness of its body, the familiarity of its smell, the singularity of its voice, the sweetness of its breathing as something quite separate from a woman's delight in the body of her lover' (Chase and Rogers, p.137). Marin in 'Mother and Child' argues that there is, in fact, no distinction to be made 'between motherly affection and female passion', and suggests that whether with husband or child, women are practising the 'same love, this erotic energy continuous with our early attachment to our own mother's body, in tirelessly deliberate and mediated ways' (Chase and Rogers, p.137).

Gemmell's comparatively open description of the sensual nature of her experience with her newborn child appears to confirm Radway's observation that western cultures are accepting of mother-child eroticism *provided* it is presented as a period of 'blissful symbiotic union' that takes place during the early days of mother and child (Radway, p.156). In Rozsika Parker's chapter entitled 'the Fantasy of Oneness', she goes so far as to suggest that this idea is integral to our understanding of perfect motherhood: 'the maternal ideal suggests that mother love means

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<sup>12</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'A Dedication to my Wife', *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985) p.234.



oneness' (Parker, R., p.29). Freud and Lacan have been largely responsible for achieving this degree of acceptance of early mother-child eroticism, providing both the necessary language and the psychoanalytic discourse to describe and legitimise it. Psychoanalysis, therefore, offers a discursive model to investigate mother-child eroticism. Indeed, it was Lacan who proposed the term 'jouissance' to describe the 'special, pre-Oedipal, fusional, pleasure' (Kaplan, p.31) of the kind described by Lorde and depicted above by Gemmell.

### **Exploring the Oedipal Complex in Fictional Representations of Motherhood: Past and Present**

Historically, Freud's psychoanalytic theorisation of the Oedipus complex (a term he established in 1910) has been responsible for legitimising and popularising the erotic aspect of the sexual bond between a mother and her children. Within mainstream Western culture, Freud's Oedipal drama has become a universally accepted *representation* of desire within the nuclear family. Freud asserts that children in the pre-oedipal stage of development enjoy a sensuous, symbiotic union with their mother. He further elaborates on his idea to suggest that on a Symbolic level the boy child's longing for and identification with his mother is ended by the entry of the Father and the child's need for individuation. Freud argues that the boy child fears castration at the hands of his Father if he continues his erotic desire for his mother.<sup>13</sup> Hence the boy is prompted into

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<sup>13</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'Family Romances', *Standard Edition*, Vol. 9, (1909; London: Hogarth Press: 1951b); Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', *Standard Edition*, Vol. 7, (1903; London: Hogarth Press: 1953a), pp. 135-243; Sigmund Freud, Vol. 21.

identification with the Father and with the Phallus and, as Kaplan dryly observes, 'looks forward both to one day having symbolic power like his father and to recuperating his mother through marriage to someone like her' (Kaplan, p.30). But to achieve individuation the boy has had to reject the mother, and his original feminine identification with her remains an on-going problem for him, resulting in a lasting fear of the feminine.

Distilled and distorted versions of Freud's theory remain prevalent in popular culture. In 'A Virtuous Woman', Michael Bywater offers this comic, reductive analysis of Freud's Oedipal drama:

shrinks tell us [of] the primal psychic wound, the separation  
of the son from the mother; [that] the scar never heals,  
and that's why men are in so many ways so horrible.  
But men aren't that bad, and shrinks talk balls.<sup>14</sup>

Freud's theory is either recognised as an account of human psychological development or is regarded sceptically as another discursive model oppressive to women that should be critiqued along with all the other discursive representations. Grosz observes that this latter approach is adopted by Irigaray: 'she uses psychoanalysis in her work without being committed to its fundamental propositions, offering philosophical critiques of phallogentric, psychoanalytic discourses' (Grosz, p.104).

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Also see discussion of Freud's Electra theory in Nancy Friday, *My Mother, Myself: The Daughter's Search for Identity* (London: HarperCollins, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Bywater, 'A Virtuous Woman', in *Sons & Mothers*, ed. by Matthew Glendinning and Victoria Glendinning (London: Virago, 1997), pp.193-211, (p.202), hereafter *SM*.

Kaplan argues that Freud's reputation and longevity in the popular imagination is due, in part, to his theory fitting the moment. Her observation arose from a study of complicit maternal melodramas in popular culture, dating from 1830 to 1970. She asserts that it was

the forced close, daily contact between the mother (situated in the home, without a career) and her child - a contact now divorced from the labour within the pre-Industrial home in which children also engaged - that elicited the Oedipal neuroses Freud theorised. (Kaplan, p.27)

Writing in 1992, Kaplan suggests that 'the particular form the sexual drive takes within this family', may well be about to change. She speculates that the 'twenty-first century, postmodern family modes may well produce a different form of the sexual drive because very different social, biological and psychological conditions may well prevail' (Kaplan, p.27).

In contradiction to Kaplan's predictions, interpretations of Freud's theorising of desire within the family remain evident in the millennium fiction this thesis analyses, despite the mother's return to the workplace after giving birth now being commonplace and despite the prevalence of single or divorced parents and extended step-families. Given that recent texts are concerned with depicting these changes to the institution of motherhood, it is surprising that an implicit acceptance of the psychoanalytic model of mother-child desire persists. But, whilst staying generally within the Freudian model of family desire, these texts do demonstrate a decrease in dominance of this form of representation through some subtle differences and changes. Turn of this century fiction

depicts, for example, a generational divide between grandmothers and mothers that is particularly interesting. The grandmothers of more recent texts, for example in Gregory's *The Little House* (1998) and Roy's *Small Things* (1997), exhibit similar tendencies to the melodramatic interpretation of a Freudian greedy, sexually frustrated, possessive mother, whilst their daughters and daughters-in-law (such as Ruth) are far more likely to fall victim to ambivalence or to a failure to bond with their offspring.

One can only speculate as to why the Oedipal dilemma continues to resonate within literature during the period 1995-2010. Perhaps it is because of the creative and dramatic appeal of drawing on ancient stories, or that literature itself is revealing a real psychological process. Maybe it is because this particular psychological discourse is now the only safe outlet for expressing the feelings of desire that some mothers and children have for each other: the Oedipal drama having become a culturally accepted form of representation.<sup>15</sup> The question of whether or not there is sufficient empirical evidence to support Freud's theories of child sexual development lies outside the scope of this thesis, but evidence of the persistence (although less dominant) of some of Freud's theories in contemporary texts, despite changes to the way in which we

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<sup>15</sup> This continued acceptance of Freud's general principle of individuation is reflected in late twentieth-century texts. Shriver's *A Perfectly Good Family* (1996) details how the mother reinforces her sexual claim on her husband to her daughter: 'she told me plenty of details about their sex life – to rub salt in the wound that she slept with father and I didn't'. Lionel Shriver, *A Perfectly Good Family* (London: Harper, 2009), p.221. Pearson's Kate similarly acknowledges her unresolved desire for her father: 'but dad was my first love and I always took his side even when my mother's hazel eyes disappeared in big racoon circles' (*HSD*, p.117).

mother, is interesting and begs further investigation, as do instances of variation of those theories.

### **Mothers, Sons and Lovers and Tales of Paralyzing Love<sup>16</sup>**

Although written outside of this study's period of focal interest Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913) provides a faithful portrayal of individuation theory in the literary imagination and hence, a template against which to track developments in contemporary fiction's interpretation of Oedipal desire.<sup>17</sup> *Sons and Lovers* is also one of the best known fictional examples of an erotically charged mother-son relationship (as demonstrated by Matthew and Victoria Glendinning's homage in their choice of title for their anthology *Sons and Mothers*), and has, therefore, been influential in informing the public consciousness of this type of erotic mothering. The mother who refuses to facilitate individuation from herself for her child has become established as a culturally recognisable figure since the Second World War. Mrs Morel's style of mothering, over-indulgent and cloying, is the precursor to many other well-known fictional and dramatised examples such as Mrs Danvers in Daphne de Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and Carrie's (1976) fanatical mother in the film of that

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<sup>16</sup> See Alfred Kazin, 'Sons, Lovers and Mothers', in *The Viking Critical Edition of Sons and Lovers*, ed. by Julian Moynahan (New York: Viking, 1968), p.599. His work is cited in Millett, p.248.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence claimed not to have read Freud and argued against what he described as the 'vicious half-statements of the Freudians' about his work. *The Cambridge Edition of The Letters and Works of D.H. Lawrence: Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious and Fantasia of the Unconscious*, ed. by Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.xxviii. However, Lawrence's wife Frieda has confirmed that they did discuss Freud's theories. Millett claims that 'the précis itself [to *Sons and Lovers*] is so determinedly Freudian' and that Lawrence 'rewrote the book at least twice. The final version, like the précis, was done after Frieda had "explained" Freudian theory to Lawrence' (Millett, p.249).

name, and so on. In the words of Irigaray, this mother is 'closed in upon the jealous possession of [her] valued product'.<sup>18</sup>

*Sons and Lovers* is useful too in demonstrating how conservative turn of this century fiction has become with regard to the sexual element of the mother-child relationship. For although *Sons and Lovers* was written nearly a century ago it illustrates a degree of explicitness in its representation of mother-child eroticism not entertained in the contemporary texts considered here. Although it could be argued that it is Lawrence as a *writer*, rather than *the period* in which he wrote, that is the exception (Lawrence gained notoriety for the explicit nature of his work culminating in his trial for obscenity with his novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*), the explicitness of *Sons and Lovers* does indicate a general change in sexual mores: the moral outcry against Lawrence occurred over his depiction of an adult sexual relationship, rather than the quasi-incestuous one he depicted between Mrs Morel and her son Paul. Hence, the novel's frankness is able to provide an insight into a fictional interpretation of mother-child eroticism not available in more recent work.

*Sons and Lovers* provides the reader with a layman's version of Freud's Oedipal drama and explores the psychological impact on the children of a mother who, according to Freud's theory, fails to facilitate her sons' individuation from herself. One reading of the title of the novel suggests that her sons grow up to become her lovers in all but the

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<sup>18</sup> Whereas I am aware Mrs Danvers is not Rebecca's biological mother, she fulfils that role in the novel. Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*, (London: Gollancz, 1938). *Carrie*. Dir. Brian de Palma. MGM Home Entertainment. 1976. Kaplan also cites some of these examples in her discussion of the 'bad' phallic mother, referencing Irigaray's essay, 'This Sex Which Is Not One', in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Kaplan, p.46).

consummation of the sexual act. For Mrs Morel loves her children 'passionately'. William, her first-born, came to her

just when her own bitterness and disillusion came hardest to bear; when her faith in life was shaken, and her soul felt dreary and lonely. She made much of the child, and the father was jealous. At last Mrs Morel despised her husband. She turned to the child; she turned from the father. (*SL*, p.18)<sup>19</sup>

The mother's relationship with her son is depicted as romantic, with the child wooing his mother with flowers and, when he visits her as a grown man, Lawrence informs the reader that his mother is 'almost in tears at having him to herself again' (*SL*, p.100). Mrs Morel's connection with her second son, Paul, 'was more subtle and fine, perhaps not so passionate as with her eldest' (*SL*, p.56) but no less romantically-charged:

suddenly their eyes met, and she smiled to him – a rare, intimate smile, beautiful with brightness and love [...] the mother and son walked down station street, feeling the excitement of lovers having an adventure together. (*SL*, p.72)

In a letter to his friend Edward Garnett in 1912, Lawrence provides a brief synopsis of this Oedipal love triangle that necessarily excludes the father: both sons, he writes, 'love the mother – all the sons hate and are

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<sup>19</sup> To a certain extent, the temptation for the mother to turn away from the husband and towards the child continues to be represented in contemporary texts, demonstrated by Kate Saunders's short story 'This Crying-Thing' (1992), in which she describes the transfer of affections in psychoanalytic, symbolic terms: 'then I got pregnant [...] and became hugely fat. In the final month, I had severe oedema, and had to waddle to the jeweller's, to have my wedding ring sawn off my finger. Looking back, this seems highly symbolic. My body had chosen Felix, and elected to slough off his father', Kate Saunders, 'This Crying-Thing' in *SM*, pp.150-67 (p.156).

jealous of the father'.<sup>20</sup> Mr Morel, the unfortunate spare part in his family's domestic and emotional arrangements, attempts to annexe his first born William (who we are told 'was so pretty' [SL, p.18]) from a feminine identification with his wife by cutting his son's hair. A Freudian interpretation of this scene would suggest that removing William's 'dark gold ringlets' (SL, p.19) represents the symbolic threat of castration that supposedly will prompt William into identification with his father (a process Freud believed would facilitate the development of a super-ego), and prevent his mother from making 'a wench on 'im' (SL, p.19). Lawrence portrays Mrs Morel as understanding that her husband's actions have a far greater significance than that of simply cutting William's hair: 'she knew, and Morel knew, that that act had caused something momentous to take place in her soul. She remembered the scene all her life, as one in which she had suffered the most intensely' (SL, p.19). The mother 'looked down at the jagged, close-clipped head of the child. She put her hands on his hair, and stroked and fondled his head. "Oh - my boy!" she faltered. Her lips trembled, her face broke, and snatching up the child, she buried her face in his shoulder and cried painfully' (SL, p.19).

This scene is subtly replicated in Pearson's *How She Does It*. Whilst his wife is out at work, Kate's husband Richard arranges for their young son's hair to be cut, without her knowledge. That evening, Kate is in bed:

lying here thinking things could be a lot worse (at least

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<sup>20</sup> Aldous Huxley ed., *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence* (London: Heinemann, 1932), p.78.



my husband is not an alcoholic serial adulterer) when Ben totters into the bedroom and I can hardly believe what I am seeing.

'Oh God Richard, what's happened to his hair?'

Rich peers over the top of the duvet, as though noticing his son, who will be one in January, for the first time.

'Ah. Paula [the nanny] took him to that place by the garage. Said it was getting in his eyes.'

'He looks like something out of the Hitler youth.'

'Well, it will grow back, obviously. And Paula thought, and I thought too, obviously, that the whole Fauntleroy ringlet thing – well, it's not how kids look these days, is it?'

'He's not a *kid*. He's my baby. And it's how I want him to look.' (*HSD*, p.13)

Thus the same psychic drama is being played out in *How She Does It* as in *Sons and Lovers*. The similarity between the two scenes is made all the more remarkable for their being written almost a hundred years apart. Not only are the mothers' reactions to the haircut the same but Richard also seems to be fulfilling the same psychological function as Mr Morel. Lawrence portrays Mrs Morel as a woman who will not let go and acquiesce to her child's rejection of her: she is not going to voluntarily renounce 'the blissful symbiotic union' that Radway maintains is part of the mother-child relationship (Radway, p.156). By cutting his child's hair, Richard too appears to be protecting his son from his wife Kate's feminisation, ridding the child of his ringlets. This twenty-first-century exchange concludes with Richard cajoling his wife: "it just means you've got to learn to let go, Kate" (*HSD*, p.13).

Inevitably, the passage of time has created obvious differences between the representation of mothers such as Mrs Morel and Kate. Mrs Morel exists in the type of domestic and psychological bubble theorised by Kaplan, involving 'forced close, daily contact between the mother (situated in the home, without a career) and her child', an environment that, Kaplan maintains, 'elicited the Oedipal neuroses Freud theorised' (Kaplan, p.27). By contrast, Kate often does not see her children for days at a time, due to her intensive work schedule. Her nanny and the husband have more daily contact with her son, as the exchange between Kate and Richard demonstrates. The question remains as to why the psychological implications of this incident have apparently persisted unchanged.

In *Torn in Two* Rozsika Parker theorises that it is the *fantasy* of oneness, rather than the mother's real or psychological experience of mothering that continues to create a situation where one parent attempts to exclude the other:

the maternal ideal constructed around a mythic portrait of a relationship of unity offers very little space for a partner's presence in relation to the child. The partner or paternal role is basically reduced to one of protecting the child from the negative consequences of the ideal – from the engulfment which is bound to function as the other side of the coin to blissful fusion. (Parker, R., p.51)

Parker appears to be arguing that it is the *fantasy* of the blissful, symbiotic, pre-oedipal union of mother and child (inherent in the ideal)

that elicits such behaviour, rather than the function of some deep psychological process.

### **Acknowledging the Sexual in the Oedipal Complex**

However, a notable difference between Lawrence's and Pearson's depiction of a child's first steps toward individuation from its mother is that Pearson steers clear of attributing any sexual motive to Kate's unwillingness to 'let go' of her son (*HSD*, p.13).<sup>21</sup> In 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes' (1915), Freud claims that all types of love originate in the sexual instincts, yet *How She Does It* represses this aspect of mother-love.<sup>22</sup> In common with the representation of Mrs Morel, Kate's original desire for her husband has diminished after having children:

he is Daddy and I am Mummy and finding the time to be Kate and Richard – to be You and Me – well, it slipped down the agenda. Sex now comes under Any Other Business, along with Parking Permits and a new stair carpet. (*HSD*, p.71)

But Pearson does not, as Lawrence does, depict Kate's sexual energy as being re-directed towards her children. Lawrence embraces the sexual aspect of the mother-son relationship and depicts Mrs Morel's rejection of her sexual relationship with her husband as contributing to the strength of her sexual bond with her sons. In the same letter to Garnet, Lawrence

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<sup>21</sup> In Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations*, house-husband Thomas reads a story by Tolstoy called *The Kreutzer Sonata*. In it, the main character Pozdnyshev, 'argues quite persuasively that love does not exist. Love is only an aspect of sexual desire: like music it is a culturally sanctioned disguise for the state of arousal' (*BV*, p.223).

<sup>22</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes', *Standard Edition*, Vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1915).

provides this description of the motivations behind Mrs Morel's mothering: 'she has had a passion for her husband, so the children are born of passion, and have heaps of vitality. But as her sons grow up, she selects them as lovers – first the eldest, then the second' (Millett, p.245). Pearson omits any reference to the sexual in her character's relationship with her son, save from remarking how confused this aspect of mothering makes her feel:

what is the correct mother-of-the-world attitude to an infant son's sexuality? Delight that the penis works, of course. Amazement that I could, in my own female body, have grown this caterpillar-sized miracle of plumbing and pleasure. But also strange shyness at evidence of early masculinity with all that it implies. (*HSD*, p.108)

Similar confusion concerning infant sexuality and, more specifically, how to manage a child's desire for its mother, confronts Marin in her description of waking up with her son. In her autobiographical account, 'Mother and Child' her five-year-old son suddenly starts pretending to be a baby and wanting to breastfeed as part of his role play:

I laugh him away, but he insists and pretends to grab for my breast. 'Cut it out!' I say partly laughing because he's laughing, but partly serious too, and in this moment thinking quite concertedly about where the boundaries ought to be. (Chase and Rogers, p.139)

Here, the mother recognises the sexual element to her son's play, whereas he is simultaneously motivated by it and unconscious of it. The problem faced by the mother in this scenario is how best to manage her son's advances: received wisdom, from the Church to Freud, urges the mother to reject her son, to follow a series of 'normative steps to desexualising the child's attachment to his/her mother's body' (Chase and Rogers, p.136). As a feminist, however, Marin takes issue with society's dictates, arguing that, 'I don't want my body to become distant, mysterious, and only, therefore, as an object of frustrated desire. I want a woman's body to be a real thing to him, with its varying characterising features and quirks, cycles and stages' (Chase and Rogers, p.139). However, she does not describe how she responds to her son, her silence further illustrating the complexity and taboo of confronting such a sensitive subject.

By relegating commonplace experiences such as Marin's, to 'the margins of culture' (Chase and Rogers, p.121), current cultural taboo makes achieving her ideal of permitting her son to have freer access to her body extremely problematic. Taboo has helped to create awareness of the playful encounter between Marin and her child and turn it into a potential *incident*. Far from preventing abuse, it may be argued that taboos help to create an environment for abuse, an argument which appears to be supported by empirical evidence suggesting that abused children go on to become adult abusers. Chase and Rogers illustrate the intolerance engendered by our increased awareness of sexual abuse, citing the real-life case of Karen Carter, whose child was taken into care

for a year as the result of a telephone call she made to a Breastfeeding Support Service, to express her concerns about becoming sexually aroused whilst breastfeeding. Chase and Rogers conclude their report of this incident with the observation that, 'this is a 1990s story, not a Victorian one' (Chase and Rogers, p.129).

By contrast, Lawrence's novel, far closer to the Victorian era than our own, is unabashed in making the sexual content of Mrs Morel's and Paul's relationship the subject of his novel. Lawrence reveals the latent potency of the sexual aspect of the mother-son relationship when Paul returns from an evening out with Miriam, a potential girlfriend. His mother has been brooding over the threat posed by Miriam to her relationship with her son and immediately draws Paul into empathising with her feelings of vulnerability:

'you know, Paul – I've never had a husband –not really'.  
He stroked his mother's hair, and his mouth was on her  
throat ... his mother kissed him a long fervent kiss.  
'My boy!' she said, in a voice trembling of passionate love.  
Without knowing, he gently stroked her face. (*SL*, p.156)

Walter Morel walks in on this moment of erotically-charged intimacy between his wife and son, grumbles (rather understatedly) 'at your mischief again' and the two love rivals come close to fighting it out (*SL*, p.156). This scene represents the conclusion of the battle that began when Walter cut William's hair. Mrs Morel emerges victorious having secured psychological possession of both her sons in defiance of her

husband, and Mr Morel is left to take himself off to bed, defeated: 'his last fight was fought in that home' (*SL*, p.157).

Mrs Morel has prevented her sons 'turning to the Father' and has achieved their lasting identification with the Feminine. Some feminists, like Kaplan, assert that Freud's (and Lacan's) theories position the mother in 'very specific ways' (Kaplan, p.40). Whilst their work acknowledges mother-child eroticism (and has legitimised it on a cultural level), accepted psychological practice demands that the mother must relinquish that sensuous energy in order for individuation on the part of the child to occur. According to Kaplan's view of psychoanalytic theory, the sacrifice of the mother's erotic attachment to the child is 'the price of separation and individuation essential to human growth and autonomy' (Kaplan, p.32).<sup>23</sup> It could be argued, then, that psychoanalytic theory has, in part, assumed the mantle of traditional religion by continuing the ideal of the self-sacrificing, asexual *angel* mother. Lawrence adheres to the notion of Mrs Morel's sacrifice by illustrating the psychological cost to her children of her refusal to relinquish her sexual hold over them: Paul responds to his mother's confidences by 'immediately [...] hat[ing] Miriam bitterly' (*SL*, p.156). Lawrence's depiction concurs with Freud's hypothesis that if individuation is not facilitated by the mother, the child, when grown, will not be able to form enduring, intimate relationships with the opposite sex.

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<sup>23</sup> Commenting on *The Rainbow*, Millett observes that in common with one of Ruskin's queens, the mother has become the arbiter of ethical norms: 'the man placed in her hands their own conscience, they said to her "be my conscience-keeper, be the angel at the doorway guarding my outgoing and my incoming"' (Millett, p.258).

## Devouring Maternal Vampires<sup>24</sup>

In *Sexual Politics* Millett asserts that Lawrence (and his critics after him), 'have placed all the emphasis in *Sons and Lovers* on the artist as an ambitious young man, upon the spectral role his mother plays in rendering him incapable of complete relations with women his own age - his sexual or emotional frigidity' (Millett, p.246). The novel, written from the boy-child's point of view, is supposedly semi-autobiographical. As the potential template for Paul, Lawrence emphasises what he believes to be the tragic outcome of Mrs Morel's style of mothering, particularly through Paul's reaction to his mother's death. Paul promptly severs all ties with his actual lovers, Clara and Miriam, and ends the novel alone:

[His mother] was the only thing that held him up, himself, amid all this. And she was gone, intermingled herself. He wanted her to touch him, have him along with her. But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked toward the city's gold phosphorescence. (SL, p.299)

In her critique of *Sons and Lovers* Millett cites Lawrence's amateur essay in psychoanalysis 'Fantasia of the Unconscious' (1922) in which he engages with Freud's Oedipal complex (Millett, p.251).<sup>25</sup> In this essay Lawrence is explicit about what he believes to be the effects of doting, possessive, sexually motivated motherhood. The main consequence for the child, Lawrence theorises, is that the development of an autonomous, sexual self is prevented:

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<sup>24</sup> 'Critics have come to see Mrs Morel as a devouring maternal vampire as well, smothering her son with affection past the years of his need of it' (Millett, p.246).

<sup>25</sup> Millett cites from D.H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922); (New York: Viking, 1960), p.159.



when faced with the actual fact of sex-necessity, the young man meets his first difficulty. What is he actually to do with his sensual, sexual self? Bury it? Or make an effort with a stranger. For he is taught, even by his mother, that his manhood must not forgo sex. Yet he is linked up in ideal love already, the best he will ever know [...] you will not easily get a man to believe that his carnal love for the woman he has made his wife is as high a love that he felt for his mother. (Millet, p.251)

Lawrence writes further on this issue of mother worship in his letter to Garnet, with specific reference to William and Paul in *Sons and Lovers*, concluding that

when they come to manhood, they can't love, because their mother is the strongest power in their lives – and holds them [...] as soon as the young men come into contact with women there is a split. William gives his sex to a fribble, and his mother holds his soul. But the split kills him, because he doesn't know where he is. The next son [Paul] gets a woman [Miriam] who fights for his soul - fights his mother [...] The battle goes on between the mother and the girl, with the son as object. The mother gradually proves the stronger, because of the tie of blood. The son decides to leave his soul in his mother's hands, and goes for passion. Then the split begins to tell again. But, almost unconsciously, his mother realises what is the matter and begins to die. The son casts off his mistress, attends to his mother's dying. He is left in the end naked of everything, with the drift toward death.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Lawrence, *Letters*, pp.78-79.

For Lawrence, as for Freud, the Oedipal complex concerns *sexual* development. It is therefore odd that Pearson in *How She Does It* will depict a scene such as the hair cutting incident but not explore its sexual implications.

Novels in the past twenty years that include a similar cautionary tale of devouring maternal vampires to that of *Sons and Lovers* are Gregory's *The Little House* and Roy's *Small Things*. What is interesting here is that these more recent depictions of possessive mothers who choose to obstruct the individuation process for their sons, are grandmothers in these novels. The implication is that this type of mothering belongs to a past generation. Gregory depicts Elizabeth, Ruth's mother-in-law, as spending 'her life peeping through the brass letterbox, so that she could throw open the door as her son arrived, wrap him in her arms, and say, "Welcome home darling"' (*LH*, p.6). After his weekend visits, Elizabeth makes sure Patrick returns to his flat in Bristol 'with a homemade quiche and an apple crumble in the usual Sunday box of home cooked food on the back seat' (*LH*, p.19). Her attention to his physical comfort and well-being has not diminished despite his being a fully-grown man and married to Ruth for the last five years.

Similarly, Roy describes the character of Mammachi as idolising her son, Chacko, whilst moving away from the sexual aspect of this type of portrayal. Mammachi, Roy informs us, 'fed him, she sewed for him, she saw to it that there were fresh towels in his room everyday' (*GST*, p. 248). Roy depicts Chacko as needing 'his mother's adoration: indeed, he demanded it. Yet he despised her for it and, punished her in secret ways'

(GST, p.248). The nature of the depiction of Chacko's relationship with his mother illustrates the risks associated with this type of mothering in real life, as noted by Rozsika Parker, 'oneness is itself both idealised and denigrated in our culture' (Parker, R., p.45). One such punishment Chacko levies against his mother is his eventual choice of wife. Whilst in England at university, he falls in love with Margaret, partly as an act of rebellion against his mother:

he was grateful to [Margaret] for not wanting to look after him. For not offering to tidy his room. For not being his cloying mother. He grew to depend on Margaret Kochamma for not depending on him. He adored her for not adoring him. (GST, p.246)

There are many obvious similarities in the representations of Mrs Morel and Mammachi. Mrs Morel has turned away from her husband, emotionally and sexually, as has Mammachi. Roy informs us that Mammachi's infatuation with her son becomes established

the day that Chacko prevented Pappachi [her husband] from beating her (and Pappachi had murdered his chair instead). Mammachi packed her wifely luggage and committed it to Chacko's care. From then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love. (GST, p.168)

Like Pearson in *How She Does It*, Roy does not depict any erotically charged scenes between Mammachi and Chacko. The misdirection of Mammachi's sexual energy is only implied, whilst Gregory describes

Elizabeth in *The Little House* as driving a wedge into the sexual relationship between her son Patrick and his wife Ruth. Elizabeth provides crisply laundered pyjamas for her son whilst he and his wife are staying at her house. Ruth found that, 'on the infrequent occasions that they had made love since her return from the clinic, she found herself irritated by the pyjamas. Patrick's fumbling with the trousers and his laziness in leaving on the jacket were a powerful antidote to sexual desire' (*LH*, p.255). Patrick also struggles with maintaining a sexual relationship with his wife, finding himself 'rarely aroused under his mother's roof' (*LH*, p.257). Gregory does not openly depict Elizabeth as wanting to achieve carnal possession of her son, although she makes it clear that Elizabeth's intention is to inhibit her son's sexual relationship with his wife. The lack of depiction of any sexual interest these mothers may have for their sons is curious, considering the *type* of mother depicted. Perhaps these authors can now simply rely on the reader to fill in the blanks of this well-established, Freudian Oedipal mother portrait. In other words, it may have become unnecessary to portray the sexual element in their relationships with their sons, since it is generally understood to be an aspect of this type of mothering.

Like Mrs Morel, however, Roy holds the intensity of Mammachi's mothering responsible for not having equipped Chacko with the skills required for adulthood. Chacko's character is described as being yet another infant casualty thwarted in his attempts to attain independence by an over-attentive, sexually frustrated mother. Winnicott famously introduced the phrase 'the good-enough mother' as part of his thesis on

child development to combat this psychological phenomena. Winnicott argues against mothers who attempted to be 'perfect' by satisfying all their infant's needs, asserting that 'perfect' mothering could actually impede the child developing an age-appropriate level of autonomy. He recommended the 'good enough mother' approach to help to encourage healthy child development since this type of mother is neither good nor bad or the product of illusion and will therefore prompt her child into recognising her as a separate and independent entity, whilst accepting his own separate identity.

*Small Things* and *The Little House* appear to comply with Lawrence's understanding of Freud's individuation theory in other respects. Chacko and Patrick's attempts to escape from their mothers through their marriages are depicted as doomed to failure. Whilst pregnant with Chacko's daughter, Margaret grows tired of him: 'it no longer amused her that while she went to work, the flat remained in the same filthy mess that she had left it in. That it was impossible for him even to consider making the bed, or washing clothes or dishes' (GST, p.247). She eventually leaves him for another man and Chacko loses his wife and daughter, the only people to arouse in him feelings so intense that, 'fierce bands of love tighten[ed] around his chest until he could barely breathe' (GST, p.122).

Gregory also adheres to Freud's individuation theory in *The Little House*. Elizabeth undermines every attempt of her son Patrick and his wife Ruth to establish a separate, adult life together. She entices her son back to the family home with a promise of a cottage within the grounds of

her house. When Ruth falls pregnant, it is Elizabeth who chooses the décor for the couple's home, who cooks Patrick's breakfasts, who relays his telephone messages to his wife. As he waits outside the operating theatre as Ruth undergoes an emergency caesarean, Patrick is on the verge of realising how selfish he has been to Ruth during her pregnancy:

he hadn't gone to her antenatal classes, he hadn't even read her little book. Only two nights ago she had asked him to read a deep breathing exercise to her when they were in bed, and he had fallen asleep by the third sentence [...] he felt irritated with her for being so demanding, for making such absurd requests, when everyone knew, when his mother assured him, that having a baby was as natural as shelling peas, that there was nothing to worry about. And there were other causes for guilt. He had moved her out of the flat she loved, and taken her away from Bristol and her friends and her job. He hadn't even got the little house ready for her on time. He hadn't chosen wallpaper or carpets or curtains with her. He had left it to his mother, when he knew Ruth wanted him to plan it with her. He felt deeply, miserably guilty. The uncomfortable feeling lasted several minutes and then he saw a payphone and went over to telephone his mother. (*LH*, p.67)

Elizabeth immediately arrives to be at her son's side during his crisis of conscience and seduces him back into sharing her point of view, plying him with small kindnesses. She brings with her a wicker basket (straight from the pages of a fairy story) and furnishes him with strong coffee and sandwiches from it and as 'he bit into it, she watched the colour come

back into his cheeks. "I suppose she'll be alright" he said. "They said it was quite routine" (LH, p.69). Her presence absolves him from responsibility towards his wife. With Patrick back on-side and Ruth unconscious, it is Elizabeth who gets to enjoy the first precious moments with the newborn baby, a wound from which Patrick's young family never recovers.

Neither Paul, Chacko nor Patrick have been able to negotiate separation and achieve individuation from their mothers and in consequence they fail to maintain successful relationships with the women in their lives. In *Torn in Two* Rozsika Parker observes that there is a

curious contradiction at the heart of the maternal ideal. While harmony, unity and attainment of ever greater emotional closeness through the employment of empathy are held up as the goal to mothering, the pursuit of a sense of oneness is simultaneously considered to be a symptom of maternal inability to separate [...] women pursue mothering in a culture which warns against the Scylla of overprotection on the one side and a Charybdis of rejection on the other. (Parker, R., p.45)

Hence, psychological interpretations of the mother-child relationship in popular culture can obscure and detract from the joy and fulfilment a mother can experience from nurturing her children. Parker observes that,

'the mother in psychoanalytic theory [is] delineated as overprotecting, rejecting, smothering and depriving' (Parker, R., p.17).<sup>27</sup>

As certain psychoanalytic explanations of mother-child bonding and separation filter into popular consciousness, motherhood's pleasures and meanings are therefore further problematised. The discipline of psychoanalysis has been instrumental in the formation of a culture of mother-blaming. Parker offers evidence to support this claim:

Paula J. Caplan and Ian Hall-McCorquodale studied 125 articles in major clinical journals for 1970, 1976 and 1982 in which etiology and treatment of 72 different forms of psychopathy was discussed. They found that where any cases of pathology were mentioned, almost invariably mothers were in it. (Parker, R., p.16)<sup>28</sup>

The impact of psychological discourse on the cultural perception of what constitutes *good mothering* is ironic when one considers that psychoanalysis is, itself, just another discourse and it would be impossible to prove its claims.

### **Devouring Filial Vampires?**

Enduring concern with the supposedly negative effects of over-attentive motherhood, which interprets the mother's efforts as potentially selfish, manipulative, stifling and sexually suspect, often obscures the motives and actions of mothers who are simply trying to care well for their

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<sup>27</sup> The culture of mother blaming is discussed in chapter four of this study.

<sup>28</sup> Parker cites from P. Caplan and I. Hall-McCorquodale, 'Mother Blaming in Major Clinical Journals', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 55 (1985), 345-53.



children.<sup>29</sup> It is possible, for example, to exclude psychoanalytic theory from interpretations of Mrs Morel's dedication to her children and understand her efforts as a job well done. After all, she raises two boys from the depths of poverty, saving them from lives of ignorance and jobs down the pit, to a position where both have possibilities for their futures. Even Lawrence, in his 'Fantasia of the Unconscious', acknowledges that Paul as a boy

gets on swimmingly [...] he gleefully inherits his adolescence and the world at large, mother-supported, mother loved. Everything comes to him in glamour, he feels he sees wondrous much, understands a whole heaven, mother-stimulated. Think of the power which a mature woman infuses into her boy. He flares up like a flame in oxygen.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Millett is quick to dismiss Lawrence's 'Freudian explanations' of the novel's conclusion, finding them 'rather tacked on' (Millett, p.246). She observes a

curious shift in sympathy between the presentation of Mrs Morel from the early sections of the novel where she is a woman tied by poverty to a man she despises, done out of her rights as a human being, compelled, despite her education and earlier aspirations, to accept the tedium of poverty and childbearing [...] to the possessive matron guarding her beloved son

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<sup>29</sup> Popular culture has recently coined a new term, 'the helicopter mother', to express its condemnation of over-attentive, possessive mothering. This mocking term satirises the mother who is constantly circling her child, excessively fussing.

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence, 'Fantasia of the Unconscious', cited by Millett, p.251.

from maturity – is but the shift of Paul's self-centered understanding. (Millelt, p.247)

In line with her feminist critique of the novel, Millelt asserts that Paul

is actually in brilliant condition when the novel ends, having extracted every conceivable service from his women, now neatly disposed of, so that he may go on to grander adventures. Even here, the force of his mother, the endless spring of Lawrence's sacred font, will support him [...] for he has managed to devour all of mother that he needs; the meal will last him a lifetime. (Millelt, p.257)

It is Paul, Millelt argues, who is more morally suspect than his mother. When Paul is fully grown and achieves a level of status in his professional life, he is quick to dispatch his mother now that she has become surplus to his requirements. Millelt interprets Paul's care of his dying mother in far from altruistic terms:

when she takes an unseasonable long time to die of cancer, he dilutes the milk she has been prescribed to drink [...] by a nice irony the son is murdering her who gave him life, so that he may have a bit more for himself: he who once fed upon her milk now waters down what he gives her to be rid of her' (Millelt, p.249).

The feminist discourse that informs Millelt's appraisal of *Sons and Lovers* thus identifies Paul as the vampire, sucking at his mother's life force and knowledge of the world until eventually he bleeds her dry. By contrast, Freudian explanations present Mrs Morel as a threat to her son's

autonomy, having resigned herself to living vicariously through her sons. Situated between these two opposing representations, the notion of a mutually loving, supportive and rewarding mother-child bond slips from view. Positive depictions of 'the power which a mature woman infuses into her boy' remain, sadly, unarticulated.

### **A Feminist Construction of the Mother-Child Romance**

Feminism also provides a larger narrative for interpreting adoring motherhood, arguing that the intense romantic love and attachment Mrs Morel, Elizabeth and Mammachi have for their offspring becomes understandable within the context of patriarchy, which has thwarted their personal ambitions and desires. In his letter to Garnet, Lawrence describes Mrs Morel as 'a woman of character and refinement [who] goes into a lower class, and has no satisfactions in her own life' (Lawrence, p.78). To Mrs Morel 'the world seemed a dreary place, where nothing else would happen for her – at least until William grew up' (*SL*, p.12). She has resigned herself to living vicariously through her sons, casting off her disappointing husband and 'turning now for life and love to the children' (*SL*, p.40). Paul's absorption of his mother's life force and efforts is, therefore, merely representative of a larger schema at work: the male domination of women.

Elizabeth, Mammachi and Mrs Morel are described in each of the novels in which they appear as very capable, efficient women, who have been denied an appropriate outlet for their talents by patriarchy. Elizabeth is the embodiment of Friedan's feminine mystique. She is

always immaculately dressed and perfumed, and highly-skilled in the arts of homemaking and childcare. Whilst visiting the baby clinic with her grandson, she sits on a chair and starts to put a new nappy on Thomas: 'the Health Visitor noted her easy competence with him. "None of my mothers can do that," she said. "They all dress them on changing mats"' (*LH*, p.96). Yet despite her obvious capabilities, Elizabeth was born in an era that did not encourage the continuation of a career after motherhood. Ruth describes her mother-in-law to a work colleague thus:

'she's all-of-a-piece, you know? In the way that modern women aren't. She knows her job – which is home and support and childcare – and she does it really well. She has no ideas about feminism or freedom or career or any of that stuff. And it makes her very powerful. The home is completely hers, and it is run without a hitch'. (*LH*, p.245)

As a consequence, however, with her family grown-up and moved away, Elizabeth has no demands on her time other than arranging the church flowers. She has no ambitions or interests outside of her immediate family: and Gregory portrays the emptiness of her existence as a menace to her son's young family.

Similarly, in *Small Things* Roy depicts Mammachi as an 'exceptionally talented and [...] potentially concert class' violinist (*GST*, p.50). However, her 'lessons were abruptly discontinued when Mammachi's teacher, Launsky-Tieffenthal, made the mistake of telling [her husband] of her talent' (*GST*, p.50). Mammachi then turns her attentions to the family pickle factory, which under her administrations

becomes 'a small but profitable enterprise'. However, when her son Chacko returns home from his failed marriage in England, he informs Mammachi she is now a sleeping partner, and proceeds to run the business into the ground. Mrs Morel is a similarly quick-witted, driven individual. When her children are old enough, she joins the Women's Guild as an outlet for her intellect: 'it seemed queer to see their mother, who was always busy about the house, sitting writing in her rapid fashion: thinking, referring to books, and writing again. They felt for her on such occasions the deepest respect' (*SL*, p.44). By implication, this is a respect she is not accorded when fulfilling her more familiar, motherly function.

*Small Things* was written in 1997, and the fact that it is set partly in India, where patriarchy remains sanctioned by social and legal institutions, adds an additional insight. Women are refused an education and inheritance. Ownership of the family business and property passes from father to son, with women of the family 'hav[ing] no claim to the property' (*GST*, p.57). As *Sons and Lovers* was written in 1913, Mrs Morel is also subject to a powerful, legally sanctioned patriarchy. The nature of the relationships these mothers have with their children is depicted as the result of a patriarchal system that has frustrated them either intellectually, financially, emotionally or sexually. These mothers resist, in the only ways they can, 'the impossible masochistic, ideal, selfless maternal function' that, Kaplan maintains, 'patriarchy demands' (Kaplan, p.48). Kaplan argues that the mother has every reason to indulge in mother-child romance: 'situated as subject to the Father's Law,

why should mothers not attempt to get some benefit from their maternal function by possessing the child and getting internal satisfaction, unavailable to them otherwise?' (Kaplan, p.47)

However, by situating desire for their offspring within the context of patriarchy, credibility is also lent to the suspicion that this type of love is a manifestation of a corrupted female self. By implication, therefore, this love is *unnatural* and potentially destructive, as these fictional examples demonstrate. Similarly, Irigaray regards *jouissance* as a 'disruptive excess [...] on the feminine side' which may be used to jam 'the theoretical [Freudian-Lacanian] machinery [of female sexual development] itself' (Kaplan, p.35),<sup>31</sup> whilst de Beauvoir believes that 'the mother finds in her infant a carnal plenitude – as does the lover in her beloved – and this not in surrender but in domination; she obtains in her child what man seeks in woman: another, combining nature and mind, who is to be both prey and double' (de Beauvoir, p.257). In considering Mrs Morel's relationships with her children Millett concludes that 'her method of continuing to seek some existence through a vicarious role in the success she urges on her sons, is, however regrettable, fairly understandable' (Millett, p.248). Perhaps it can be argued that part of the appeal for women of libidinal mothering lies in the fact that mothers are

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<sup>31</sup> Kaplan cites Irigaray from 'The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine: An Interview', in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p.78.

The frontispiece of this thesis is Bellini's Madonna. Interestingly, Kaplan discusses Julia Kristeva's analysis of Bellini's portrait. Kristeva asserts that Bellini was able to capture some of the mother's *jouissance* in the colours he used for this painting. Kristeva believes she is able to detect the mother's *jouissance* in the pulsations and the rhythms Bellini's colour produces. Kristeva locates *jouissance* in a pre-linguistic realm which she describes as the Chora. Women have access to this realm through giving birth, men have access primarily through language and art. Julia Kristeva, 'Motherhood According to Bellini', trans. by T. Gora, A. Jardine and L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), (Kaplan, p.41).

covertly taking pleasure in something that patriarchy demands should be denied them. By this measure, then, jouissance becomes less an authentic pleasure of motherhood and more a reaction against patriarchy, and we return to our earlier conundrum, as posited by Kaplan:

how can motherhood ever be non-patriarchal, non-complicit? Honouring the mother's subjectivity, the mother's voice, maybe important in a culture where that subjectivity and voice have been silenced; but the question is: what precisely is it possible for the mother to speak in a patriarchal culture? If the mother's position is patriarchally constructed, can she only speak within the confines of that construction? How could she speak otherwise? (Kaplan, p.40)

Patriarchy has not been politically or legally sanctioned in Britain for the last eighty years, and sexism is now a prosecutable offence. For this reason, perhaps, textual evidence suggests that this Freudian, possessive type of mother-love may well become a thing of the past. Despite being represented in novels written during the last twenty years, the characters of Mammachi and Elizabeth belong to an earlier generation, those who had their children in the 1950s and 60s. In Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations* the middle-aged Howard confirms a generational difference between his wife's approach to nurturing and that of his mother. When he falls ill and is forced to spend a period of time at home in bed, he tries to lure his wife Claudia into spending some of her day with him. Her blank refusal prompts him to reminisce about his mother:

it is good that Claudia doesn't drop everything to lie beside him all day. He remembers the way his mother used to look after him when he was ill. There were always flowers in a glass by the bed, and a tray coming up the stairs. He remembers the feeling of paralysing love, the way she seemed to want to keep him there and he half wanted to be kept, as though she had stolen him back from the world in order to perfect her care of him. (BV, p.76).

Although the current generation of women enjoy legally-sanctioned equality, however, and can pursue careers, the texts discussed in this study suggest that these careers are fairly short-lived following the arrival of children.<sup>32</sup> In the context of motherhood, these texts therefore reveal a form of patriarchy being re-established, as predicted by Elizabeth for Ruth in *The Little House*: 'you won't work forever, dearest. You might find that when you have a family-sized house in the country you feel like giving up work altogether. You might have something else to keep you busy' (LH, p.11). Before the birth of Thomas, Ruth enjoys a 'demanding and absorbing' job as a journalist for Radio Bristol (LH, p.8). Her job 'means everything to [her]. [She's] the only woman news producer on the station – it's a real responsibility, and this week [she] broke a national story' (LH, p.12). Despite this status, her male colleagues still assume that she works 'for pocket money [...] "it's alright for you, Ruth, with your glamour-boy husband bringing in a fortune"' (LH, p.25). On the announcement of

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<sup>32</sup> The characters of Kate in Pearson's *How She Does It*, Eva in Shriver's *Kevin*, Claudia and Tonie in Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations*, Ruth in *The Little House*, Dorrie in Simpson's *Hey Yeah*, Tess and Lennie in Myerson's *Something*, and the mother in Cleave's *Incendiary* all either give up work completely or go part-time following the birth of their children.



her pregnancy, her husband is delighted. Ruth, on the other hand, is ambivalent, knowing what having children still means for a woman in the final years of the twentieth century: 'of course he would be happy – it would not be Patrick who would leave the work he loved' (*LH*, p.46).

With Ruth pregnant, both husband and father-in-law decide to sell her beloved flat in Bristol, 'for the flat belonged to his father, and his father wished to sell. There was little Ruth could do but mourn their decision and pack as slowly and unwillingly as possible' (*LH*, p.47).

Following the birth, Ruth complains to her mother-in-law that she wished Patrick could take on some of the care of their newborn son, expressing a dissatisfaction typical of her generation, to which Elizabeth replies, "'well, men have to work'" (*LH*, p.92). Gregory emphasises that Elizabeth's response states 'an inarguable fact' (*LH*, p.92).

Patrick's experience of working after the birth of his son in *The Little House* is uninterrupted by childcare issues:

Patrick need do no more on a weekday than kiss his son's milky face at breakfast time in the morning as he left for work, and play with him for half an hour before bed in the evening [...] he liked the way his presence was a treat and not a duty' (*LH*, p.164).

Work excuses Patrick from any of the care for his son, the child he wanted so dearly and seduced Ruth into having. Gregory incites the reader to indignation with Patrick's outrageous behaviour, for he is even embarrassed to take his baby for a walk in his pram: 'Patrick instinctively shrank from the thought of walking down the road, even his own parents'

private drive, pushing a pram. There was something so trammelled and domestic about the image' (*LH*, p.84). With a husband who refuses to help with child-care, without a career, a property or time to call her own, Ruth's experience of motherhood in *The Little House* differs little from that of her mother-in-law Elizabeth, that of Mammachi in *Small Things* or that of Mrs Morel in *Sons and Lovers*, a fact spelt out to her by a former work colleague:

'you'll never be equal [...] because the set-up is weighted against you. [Patrick's] got the good career and you have a baby. He earns money, and gives you some of it. He controls an office with a budget and half a dozen staff, and you control a little house. He's a man and you're a woman'. (*LH*, p.248)

Superficially, Tess's experience of motherhood in *Something Might Happen* appears to reflect a twenty-first century perception of things having changed for the better for mothers. Tess has returned to work five months after the birth of their fourth child and her husband Mick has become a house-husband, looking after the older children. In reality, however, Tess's career has become no more than a side-line, one which she can arrange so that she can take her baby to work with her. Despite working, Tess remains the primary carer for her family, rendering the fulfilment of any more grandiose career ambitions impossible. Unlike a working man, Tess is not afforded any free-time between her job and home life: 'in the life that I have, I never get to be in peace or in silence, not ever' (*SMH*, p.145). Participating fatherhood remains a choice, even

for a house husband like Mick. This perception is revealed when Mick offers to collect the children from school, reassuring Tess that, “would I offer if I didn’t mean it?” (*SMH*, p.256). Help remains his to *offer* and, as a result, Tess is suitably grateful to him.

Similarly in Cusk’s *The Bradshaw Variations*, Thomas regards his role as house husband as a choice rather than as a full-time occupation to be taken seriously. Thomas gives up work to look after his daughter Alexa, whilst Tonie, his wife, resumes her academic career. However, he views his period at home as time spent in search of ‘authenticity’ and intends to ‘spend a whole year playing the piano’ (*BV*, p.60). Childcare is not his focus and domestic chores are undertaken by an au pair. When Alexa becomes sick, Thomas is slow to notice, distracted by a novel he is reading. Fortunately, Alexa survives meningitis (yet her hearing is impaired as a result) and although unacknowledged, by either husband or wife, Thomas’s role as house husband is brought to an end by Tonie. She resumes her role of main carer in the hospital at Alexa’s bedside, sending Thomas ‘home to sleep, to make arrangements, to be male again’ (*BV*, p.249).

Shriver also depicts motherhood as having narrowed Eva’s horizons as a former entrepreneur in *Kevin*: ‘I’d been used to airports, sea views and museums’. But after giving birth to her son, ‘suddenly I was stuck in the same few rooms, with Lego’ (*K*, p.56). Motherhood continues to isolate women, so it is surprising, then, that contemporary texts do not offer more examples of, ‘frustrated woman living vicariously through her kids’ (*HSD*, p.93), as Pearson’s Kate harshly judges one of the other

mothers at school. For a striking constant in the portrayal of motherhood is that being a mother continues to separate women from their independent 'free-standing' former selves (*HY*, p.57). Despite the legal recognition of women's rights, mothers still live in a society where having children can make one feel, like Ammu in *Small Things*, 'that Life had been Lived. That her cup was full of dust' (*GST*, p. 222). Writing in 1996, Saunders laments in 'This Crying-Thing', 'the lowly status of mothers; men and their enormous reluctance to assume the mantle of fatherhood; money and the difficulty of earning it while breast-feeding' (*SM*, p.156). Saunders continues to argue that women 'are all finding the price of motherhood mighty high' (*SM*, p.156).

So there remains a remarkable and disappointing similarity between the depiction of the predicament facing Lawrence's Mrs Morel and Simpson's modern-day mother Dorrie in 'Hey Yeah'. While in their gardens at night, both women contemplate their former selves, feeling crushed by the self-sacrifice motherhood has demanded of them.

Pregnant with her third child, Mrs Morel escapes her house

to the front garden, feeling too heavy to take herself out,  
yet unable to stay in doors. The heat suffocated her.  
And looking ahead, the prospect of her life made her feel  
buried alive ... she seemed so far away from her girlhood,  
she wondered if it were the same person walking heavily  
up the back garden at the Bottoms as had run so lightly  
on the breakwater at Sheerness ten years before. (*SL*, p.12)

Similarly, Dorrie stares wistfully out into her garden at night, and feels she wants to

smash the kitchen window. She wanted to hurt herself. Her ghost was out there in the garden, the ghost of her free standing past. If she kept up this business of reunion, it would catch hold of her hands and saw her wrists to and fro across the jagged glass. It would tear her from the bosom of this family she had breastfed. (HY, p.57)

Cusk also describes a comparable scene in her novel *Arlington Park*.

Solly, standing heavily pregnant in her garden, experiences an

overpowering memory of her youth, the release of her eighteen year old self, all the imprisoned reality of Van Morrison and her minstrel boyfriend and flowers that trembled with beads of rain. It was so beautiful! It was so beautiful and yet so lost, so utterly lost and unavailing.<sup>33</sup>

These liaisons with the lost self are situated outside, away from the domestic trap of the little house (the claustrophobic nature of which is expressed in Gregory's title for her novel).<sup>34</sup> Motherhood has transformed the home into a work place, no longer a refuge but something to escape from. In Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations*, Claudia, wife of Howard and one-time art student but now mother of three, has an edifice to her former dreams and desires constructed at the bottom of her garden. Her art studio symbolises all her former ambitions prior to having

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<sup>33</sup> Rachel Cusk, *Arlington Park* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p.123.

<sup>34</sup> Shriver's Eva in *Kevin* also experiences a sense of separation. Significantly, unlike the instances above, she is not divided from her former self, but from her family. Twenty-first-century texts have a predilection for depicting ambivalent mothers who can't connect with the experience of motherhood. As Eva watches her family playing in the back yard, she laments: 'you seemed so far away [...] I'd press my palm against a sun-warmed windowpane as if against a spiritual barrier, stabbed by the same vertiginous well-wishing and aching sense of exclusion that would have tortured me had I been dead' (K, p.204).

children, although she hardly ever spends time there as her family has long taken precedence. Her husband explains the reason for the studio's neglect to the family at large: 'poor Claude', he says. 'She's too unselfish. All you women are too unselfish' (*BV*, p.36). Privately, however, Claudia acknowledges that motherhood has not only deprived her of the time required to follow her creative inclination, it has also robbed her of her will to be anything other than a mother. The studio has become no more than an expensive folly:

her studio has stood at the bottom of the garden, year after year, completed [...] it no longer bears any relationship to her theoretical urges. Though she hasn't told anyone of it, these too have slipped away'. (*BV*, p.240)

It is significant that none of these contemporary novels portray the mother's liberation from work as a joyous release. Nor does motherhood appear to compensate these characters for the loss of their work. The most dominant representation of motherhood in recent texts depict having children as marking the end of youth, beauty, ambition, autonomy and to a degree, financial freedom for women. Cusk expresses the losses associated with motherhood succinctly in *The Bradshaw Variations*. Following her daughter's illness, Tonie does 'not return to work, not even for a day. She donned the plain garment of motherhood, there in the hospital' (*BV*, p.249).

### **The Mother-Child Romance Post Millennium: Now a Chaste Love**

However, although depictions of mother-child romance appear to have declined in frequency and changed in the nature of their depiction in the literature post-millennium, it remains a feature in the portrayal of motherhood's pleasures. This persistence may be because the conditions for the formation of a romantic connection between mother and child, as hypothesised by Radway as long ago as 1984, are still prevalent today. Mothers in contemporary fiction and memoir continue to lament the loss of a life outside of motherhood. In *Reading the Romance*, Radway provided a patriarchal explanation for the appeal of mother-child *romantic* love. Radway was interested in why mothers, in particular, exhibited an 'intense reliance' on romantic popular fiction (Radway, p.59). Basing her research on the reader profile collected by the main publishers in the romance industry, Radway investigates the romance reading habits of a small group of mainly married mothers in Smithton, a suburban town in the American Midwest. Her research has as its start point, therefore, the *real* or *social* mother: the mother at the heart of feminist endeavour. On a social/cultural level, Radway concludes that romance reading is a form of resistance to patriarchy, because 'the activity so engages attention that it enables readers to deny their physical presence in an environment associated with responsibilities that are acutely felt and occasionally experienced as too onerous to bear' (Radway, p.90).

Similarly, the mothers depicted in turn of this century fiction, aware of society's preoccupation with their potentially fading beauty and

burdened with domestic responsibilities far removed from the glamour and mastery experienced in their pre-children careers, continue to turn to their children as a form of light-hearted, romantic escapism. Romance is traditionally associated with the young and childrearing presents an opportunity for mothers to return to what Ann Barr Snitow controversially claims to be women's 'one socially acceptable moment of transcendence [...] romance'.<sup>35</sup> For, as Simpson observes in *Hey Yeah*, children love their mothers and clamour for their attention with little regard for their 'worn face, free of make-up except for an unaccustomed and unflattering application of lipstick, and the flat frizz of [Dorrie's] untended hair' (*HY*, p.49). By contrast with her husband (from whom Dorrie attracts only criticism), Robin, her three-year old son, infuses Dorrie's life with a playful, romantic quality:

she tickled him and they sank down to the lino laughing and shouting, then he rubbed his barely-there velvet nose against hers like an Eskimo, his eyes close and dark and merry, inches from hers, gazing in without shame or constraint' (*HY*, p.32).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ann Barr Snitow, 'Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different', in *Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. by Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 134-40 (p.138).

<sup>36</sup> In 'Hey Yeah', the post-children Dorrie is scrutinised unfavourably by her husband: 'she was starting to get a double chin, he reflected wrathfully; she had allowed herself to put on more weight. Here he was on his wedding anniversary sitting opposite a fat woman' (*HY*, p.49).

The transition to matron remains prevalent in contemporary texts. In Jerome's short story 'Gwendolyn', in *Gas and Air*, Gwendolyn's errant boyfriend returns to her after going missing shortly before the birth of their first child and 'he noticed for the first time she had cut her hair a bit, not much, maybe four inches but it was a start of something, or maybe an end' (*GA*, p.171).



In *How She Does It*, Kate too revels in the fact that her son Ben 'couldn't get enough of me. Still can't. A mother of a one-year old is a movie star in a world without critics' (*HSD*, p.79).

Germaine Greer asserted as long ago as 1970 that 'the supreme adventure is still falling in love; although that worldly excitement is past women still insist on reliving it' (Greer, p.187). Twenty-first century culture continues to privilege romance as providing some of the most exciting moments in a woman's life. The continued popularity of the Brontës and Jane Austen, in addition to the more recent success of Helen Fielding's modern day reworking of *Pride and Prejudice* in *Bridget Jones's Diary* are evidence of the enduring appeal of romance for women.<sup>37</sup> Eva is depicted in *Kevin* as mothering in a postmodernist, postfeminist age, yet she is still influenced by romantic expectations. Eva enters motherhood hoping *to fall in love* with her child: 'I'd attended hungrily to accounts from friends: *You have no idea what it's like until you have one of your own [...] you fall in love*' (*K*, p.81, Shriver's italics). Eva jeopardises all that she holds dear to experience that moment of romantic transcendence: '*when you lay eyes on them for the first time – it's indescribable*' (*K*, p.81, Shriver's italics). Giving birth provides women with perpetual access to the euphoric feelings associated with romance. Saunders depicts her relationship with her son in romantic terms: 'I love Felix to distraction [...] it is the stormiest love affair of my life' (*SM*, p.151). The mother-child romance, therefore, maintains a romantic element in

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<sup>37</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

women's lives whilst they observe the sexual exclusivity expected of them by society.

Yet, significantly, current representations of this aspect of mother-love are more subtle than those of previous generations, as they depict a *chaste love*, in the tradition of the romance genre. This generation of mothers enjoy a sanitised, affectionate, covertly-sensual closeness with their children, which is not portrayed in terms of devouring, possessing, lusting after or damaging. Current portraits step away from the more sensational Freudian, phallic representation of the mother/child romance. The sexually-charged Oedipal depiction of motherhood appears to have become an anachronism in the depiction of the twenty-first century mother. For romantic literature has traditionally idealised 'sexuality and intimacy along chaste lines [...] glorify[ing] courtship and premarital love over sexual activity' (Chase and Rogers, p.129). Indeed, the most enduring romantic fiction, such as Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* stops before the hero and heroine consummate their love for each other sexually.<sup>38</sup> The romance's interest resides in the flirtation between the two protagonists. In the same way, the appeal of the mother-child romance is that women can enjoy physical intimacy with their children in the sure knowledge it will *not* lead to sex.

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<sup>38</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847).

## Feminist Interventionist Readings of Freud and Developments in Female Individuation Theory

The ideas of Freud and Lacan are very much of their time and have become regarded as phallogentric, in as much as women were not the focus of their enquiries. Specifically, early psychoanalysis did not help to elucidate the girl-child or the mother's true subjectivity. Feminists have since undertaken 'innovative, interventionist readings of Freud' in a quest to get the question of 'female desire [...] taken seriously' as *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* expresses it.<sup>39</sup> By privileging the phallus as mediator of the Symbolic level, the work of Freud and Lacan effectively deprives women of a *voice* within the sub-conscious. Jake Armitage, errant husband in *The Pumpkin Eater*, is critical of Freud's gender blindness, summarising his objection to Freud's work as 'all that cock' (p.47). Freud's preoccupation with the phallus is reflected too in Lawrence's work, as Millett observes:

in *Lady Chatterley*, as throughout his final period, Lawrence uses the words 'sexual' and 'phallic' interchangeably, so that the celebration of sexual passion for which the book is so renowned is largely a celebration of the penis of Oliver Mellors. (Millett, p.238)

Kaplan is similarly critical of Lacan's assertion that 'jouissance' is 'a specifically feminine, bodily, kind of ecstasy which [...] lies beyond the phallus, and is for that reason not able to be spoken within discourse' (Kaplan, p.31). Kaplan observes that 'it is in this sense that any

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<sup>39</sup> *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, ed. by Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy, (London: Batsford, 1990), p.877.

specifically *female* desire becomes impossible – at least within the Symbolic order, which is the order of discourse' (Kaplan, p.31).

Much feminist discourse from the 1970s onwards, including that of Chodorow and Radway, attempts to redress the balance. Feminist psychoanalysts focused on the girl child in individuation theory, in particular the gender differences involved in the process.<sup>40</sup> In *Reading the Romance*, Radway suspects that the compulsive nature of the reading habits of the Smithton mothers suggests a psychological motivation behind their predilection for romantic popular fiction. Radway considers the possibility of unconscious impulses behind both reader and text: why these women were drawn to read, often compulsively, a genre most noted for its formulaic nature, where 'frail flower meets bronzed god' (Eagleton, M., p.142). To explore her hypothesis further, Radway turned to the work of Chodorow, and in particular *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*.

Chodorow concentrates on two main lines of inquiry: firstly, the view that early and exclusive mothering of the female by a female creates an identification with the mother, which later produces difficulties in individuation; and secondly, the predisposition in women (as Radway concurs) for 'an on-going, unfulfilled longing for the mother even after the oedipal turn to the father and heterosexuality had been negotiated' (Radway, p.13).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Yet this work still implicitly accepts Freud's version of individuation. By providing individuation from the girl-child's viewpoint, we are merely provided with a variation on a theme.

<sup>41</sup> Parveen Adams also postulates an ongoing desire for the mother. In 'Mothering' she asserts that the child/adult never forgets the world of the Imaginary/Symbolic, and he/she continues 'to desire, unconsciously, the illusory oneness with the mother he/she

Basing her findings on Chodorow's hypothesis, Radway argues that romance reading is, 'a symptom of the on-going instability of the heterosexual solution to the Oedipal dilemma, that is, as a ritual effort to convince its readers that heterosexuality is both inevitable and natural and that it is necessarily satisfying as well' (Radway, p.14). She continues,

the romance does deny the worth of complete autonomy. In doing so, however, it is not obliterating the female self completely. Rather, it is constructing a particular kind of female self, the self-in-relation demanded by patriarchal parenting arrangements. (Radway, p.147)

Radway asserts that the heroine's attraction to the hero in romantic fiction represents an 'on-going search for the mother' (Radway, p.13). She claims that, as well as bestowing upon the hero characteristics of 'spectacular masculinity' (Radway, p.147), romance also attributes to the hero traits oddly reminiscent of the mother:

by emphasising the hero's uninterrupted gaze and the tenderness of his caress at the moment he encompasses his beloved in his still always 'masculine arms' the fantasy also evokes the memory of a period in the reader's life when she was the centre of a profoundly nurturant individual's attention. (Radway, p.84)

The physical difference between hero and heroine also echoes that of mother and child. The hero most often dwarfs the heroine, appearing to her as 'a dark giant' and when he sweeps the heroine into his arms it is as if 'she was a small child'.<sup>42</sup> The 'alpha-male' hero of the romance<sup>43</sup> does indeed evoke Greer's 'massive, dominating figure of Mother' (Greer, p.71). Radway's research concludes that 'the romantic fantasy is not a fantasy about discovering a uniquely interesting life partner, but a ritual wish to be cared for, loved and validated in a particular way' (Radway, p.83).

Radway is not alone in identifying a psychological confusion in the motivational forces behind the female pursuit of romantic love.<sup>44</sup> Parker refers to the work of the psychoanalyst Ethel Person, who 'considers that the dynamics of romantic love involve a longing for infantile bliss and plenitude within the mother child fusion'. Person continues,

in love, the lover regains his lost omnipotence, takes total possession of the beloved and achieves Oedipal victory. In achieving a union with a beloved, he undoes the defects, losses and humiliations of the past. In doing so, he identifies with the victorious rivals of his childhood and assuages his wounded narcissism.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Susan Fox, *Her Forbidden Bridegroom* (Richmond: Harlequin Mills and Boon, 2002), p.31.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph McAleer, *Passions Fortune: The Story of Mills and Boon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.150.

<sup>44</sup> Marie-Christine Hamon confirms Chodorow's hypothesis that the girl child 'refinds the mother in the father or husband or child', 'L' Ane Dossier', *m/f: A Feminist Journal* (1983), 32-33: Kaplan also concludes that individuation for the female 'is a matter of becoming the mother rather than having the mother' (Kaplan, p.32).

<sup>45</sup> E.S. Person, *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989), p.120.

Ruth's psychological journey in *The Little House* supports Radway's contention. In common with most romantic heroines, Ruth was orphaned as a child and has hoped subconsciously to re-find her dead mother through her husband and his family: 'not until she met Patrick – and especially Patrick's family had she found a complete solution to the emptiness and to the question of where she belonged' (*LH*, p.179). When her romantic fantasy of her life with Patrick is revealed to her as a fiction through a group counselling session, Ruth breaks down and cries for the first time. Initially,

she thought she was going to cry for Thomas, [her abandoned baby] but instead she said: 'I miss my mother!' in a voice that was not her own but a child's voice ringing with grief. 'I miss my mummy! She's dead and I can't bear it! And I don't know what will happen to me! And I miss her! And I miss her! And I miss her!' (*LH*, p.171).

Although the evidence from romance fiction appears to support Radway's assertion that romance reading is a symptom of the female wishing to re-find symbiotic union with the mother through her lover or child, there is a sense that psychoanalysis has moved on from Radway's and Chodorow's work of the 1970-80s. Rozsika Parker challenges the commitment to the idea of symbiotic union, either as part of 'object relations formulation or as Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic positioning of mother-infant fusion within the Imaginary' (Parker, R., p.43). She argues that more recent research based on infant observation appears to question the 'very existence of infantile fusional states' (Parker, R., p.43).

Again, Parker leans toward a more constructionist (rather than psychological) understanding of the persistence of the notion of mother-child fusion, asserting that it is most likely the result of 'retrospective fantasies on the part of the adults' (Parker, R., p.43). Parker's own anecdotal research, based on conversations with mothers, encouraged her to separate the fantasy of oneness inherent in the ideal, from what mothers actually hoped for from the relationships with their children. Her findings led her to conclude that

the culture's maternal ideal is founded on a representation of the unity of mother and child, while the moments mothers themselves define as ideal are founded on mutuality. The tension between the two can render women's pleasure in mothering somewhat suspect in their own eyes. For the maternal ideal suggests that mother love means *oneness*, while what mothers long for are loving moments of *at oneness*' (Parker, R., p. 29).

Her argument for 'mutuality' as opposed to 'unity', moments of 'at oneness' as opposed to 'oneness' describe precisely the nature of the difference detected in contemporary depictions of the mother child romance discussed here. Simpson, Myerson, Pearson and Gregory are demonstrating an understanding of the sensual pleasures of motherhood that have moved past Freud's obsession with sex and ideas of pre-oedipal fusion. Their lack of representation of the sexual in their relationships with their children may not be the result of cultural taboo concerning sexual abuse, as Chase and Rogers contend, but more the culmination of an increased understanding of female sexuality in general.



In other words, the *sexual* is perhaps not represented as part of the mother-child romance because it simply is not always there.

### **Sexuality in Motherhood: Giving Mothers a Voice**

The significance of feminist interventionist readings of Freud is that their work recognises that female desire, whether as child or mother, had remained largely unarticulated in psychoanalysis.<sup>46</sup> Light maintains that 'women are all the potential victims of a femininity which is not just endlessly defining us in terms of sexual status – we are wives, mothers, virgins, whores – but which marks us as representing *the sexual* itself' (Light, p.18). This discussion, in combination with domestic feminism of the 1960s, helped to put female sexuality, in general, on the agenda. Attitudes to female sexuality ostensibly transformed within a couple of generations. Lessing depicts this exponential change through her character of Harriet in *The Fifth Child*. Unfortunately for Harriet, her virginity, which would have at one time been much prized by society, has become a source of ridicule by the late 1960s:

'a virgin *now*', her girlfriends might shriek: 'are you crazy?' [...] her own sisters laughed at her. The girls in the office looked studiously humorous when she insisted, 'I'm sorry, I don't like all this sleeping around, it's not for me.' [...] with the same chilly contempt that good women of her grandmother's generation might

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<sup>46</sup> In psychoanalysis, the mother's experience had been metaphorically silenced like that of Jocasta, Oedipus's mother, who committed suicide by hanging upon discovering her incest with her son. Rozsika Parker observes that, 'the myth of Oedipus is not constructed around his mother's Jocasta's feelings when her baby son's foot was pierced and he was exposed to the elements on the mountainside. In my view feminists have rightly criticised psychoanalysis for looking at life from the point of view of the child to the detriment of our understanding maternal development' (Parker, R., p.16).

have used, saying, 'she's quite immoral you know,' or 'she's no better than she ought to be,' or 'she hasn't got a moral to her name'; then (her mother's generation), 'she's man mad' or 'she's a nympho' – so did the enlightened girls of now say to each other, 'it must be something in her childhood that has made her like this. Poor thing'. (*FC*, p.10)

Hence, millennium fiction gives mothers a voice with regards to their sexuality. In *Kevin*, Eva revels in the sexual honesty of her relationship with her husband Franklin: 'I had shared with you my most sordid sexual fantasies, in such disturbing violation of heterosexual norms' (*K*, p.64). Turn of this century female characters have an expectation of sexual freedom and fulfilment to a degree not experienced by the generations before them.

Perhaps, then, female sexual liberation provides another explanation for the lack of sexual content depicted in the relationship between contemporary fictional mothers and their children. Today's female characters are far more free to express their sexuality openly than Mrs Morel, and in so doing are depicted in *Kevin*, *Something, Small Things*, *The Little House*, *Incendiary*, *The Bradshaw Variations* and *How She Does It* as choosing *men* as the focus of their sexual desires, as opposed to their *children*. Like Jocasta of the Greek myth (and in contrast to Freud's theorisation of her), Eva in *Kevin* chooses her husband over her son. Franklin remains Eva's foremost love: 'I wish I had overcome my own bashfulness and had told you more often how falling in love with you was the most astonishing thing that ever happened

to me' (K, p.20). Eva concludes that, 'I could have lived without children. I couldn't live without you' (K, p.347). Unlike Mrs Morel and Mammachi, Eva does not willingly sacrifice her adult, female passion for her husband. Indeed, Eva resents Kevin for the threat he poses to her relationship with her husband. Franklin adores Kevin and devotes much of his time and energy to his son, leaving Eva feeling snubbed: 'I had created my own Other Woman who happened to be a boy. I'd seen this in-house cuckolding in other families' (K, p.347).

### **Taking Lovers: Not Sons**

One of the most significant changes to representations of motherhood during the period 1995-2010 is that mothers today are not prepared to sacrifice their adult female passion for the sake of their children, or to invest their erotic desire in their children as a substitute for an adult sexual relationship. Unlike Mrs Morel, they are not resigned to 'turning now for life and love to the children' (SL, p.40). However, their refusal does not mean that the birth of children will not precipitate a 'casting off [of] their disappointing husbands' (SL, p.40). Eva is unique within the texts discussed here in continuing a romantic passion for her husband. As part of their response to motherhood, the majority of mother characters are depicted as turning to *lovers* for solace.

Sex is often an aspect of women's lives that has been further complicated by motherhood. Motherhood often precipitates a period in a woman's life 'where the *impossibility* of being successfully feminine is keenly felt' (Light, p.22) and this lack of confidence is sometimes

compounded by the trauma (whether mental or physical) endured by the woman in giving birth. Ruth in *The Little House*

has not made love since the birth of Thomas. She felt a half-forgotten desire stir inside her. Then she remembered the pain of her stitches, and the disagreeable fatness of her belly. 'I can't', she said coldly. (*LH*, p.85)

In Myerson's novel *Something*, Tess's physical relationship with her husband suffers a decline after the birth of their daughter. Tess describes a rather pathetic attempt at recommencing sexual relations with her husband and reminisces about an earlier time

when sex was a glue, a healer - it would smooth, ease, mend, bring us closer together. As well as for pleasure we could rely on it for that, nearly always anyway. Not anymore. Now it is the thing that came between us, pushing us further away. (*SMH*, p.139)

Tess attributes this downturn in the physical aspect of their relationship to motherhood. She prepares for a romantic encounter with her husband by adorning herself in a 'boned and buttoned and strappy thing in violet lace that Mick bought for me before I got pregnant with Liv, in the days when I still had a body and knew what to do with it' (*SMH*, p.191). Motherhood has interrupted Tess's desire, leaving her attempting to kiss her husband 'as if I mean it' (*SMH*, p. 191). Similarly, Tonie's sexual relationship with her husband in *The Bradshaw Variations* suffers

after Alexa was born [...] [Tonie's body] was neither

instrument nor performer but creator, alone suddenly,  
her body a slump of giving, all untouchable aftermath.  
It did not recognise the discipline of performance. It  
just wanted to be left alone. (*BV*, p.13)

However, when the initial trauma of childbirth has passed and the transition to motherhood has been made, one would anticipate a recommencement of the relationship between husband and wife, in terms of emotion support and sexual intimacy. Yet the majority of these novels depict the mother turning away from the husband to form an alternative sexual relationship. In *Something*, Tess turns to the Police Family Liaison Officer assigned to her family's care after Lennie's murder. There is even a suspicion that Lennie herself was conducting an affair before her death. In *The Bradshaw Variations*, Tonie commits adultery whilst, unbeknown to her, her sick daughter is being rushed to hospital by her husband. In *How She Does It*, Kate flirts with the idea of having an affair with a client, arranging a spurious business meeting away from home to create the opportunity for the liaison. The mother in *Incendiary* is having sex with her lover as her husband and son are murdered by a suicide bomber in the Emirates football stadium. Ammu takes a lover in *Small Things* and incurs her family's wrath.

These fictional mothers no longer take their children in defiance of patriarchy in the way that Kaplan observed in 1992: 'situated as subject to the Father's Law, why should mothers not attempt to get some benefit from their maternal function by possessing the child and getting internal satisfaction, unavailable to them otherwise?' (Kaplan, p.47). These characters now take a lover. But taking lovers can also be regarded in

terms of a reaction against the vestiges of patriarchy. These women find the experience of motherhood 'acutely felt and occasionally experienced as too onerous to bear' (Radway, p.90), and avenge themselves against their husbands for being, often unwittingly, part of the system that has created the intolerable aspects of their situation. Rozsika Parker discovered that many real-life women enter into motherhood regarding it as the culmination of the romantic fantasy between the man and woman:

childbearing and childcare are crucially concerned with partnership – partnership of a kind at odds with the maternal ideal [...] the image of the child as a shared creative project is rooted deeply in the unconscious and some would argue is a prerequisite for identifying with being a loving parent. However, the maternal ideal in conjunction with the sexual division of labour designated by western culture is profoundly at odds with parenthood as partnership. In reality the mother more often than not finds herself alone beside the cot, whatever her prenatal fantasies. (Parker, R., p.52)

Ruth's experience of motherhood in *The Little House* reflects her unexpected abandonment by her husband following the birth of Thomas, the baby *he* wanted:

every evening, as Patrick returned Ruth's cooling dinner back to the oven, Ruth went back upstairs, rocked Thomas to sleep again, and put him into his cot [...] she saw many dawns break at the nursery window before Thomas finally dozed off and she could creep back into bed beside Patrick's somnolent warmth. Then there seemed only moments before the alarm clock rang out, and Patrick yawned noisily, stretched,

and got out of bed. (*LH*, p.86)

Ruth has sole care of their baby as Patrick has to earn money for the family: a fact Patrick exploits to his advantage. When Ruth is driven to despair by her isolation and exhaustion, he offers to pay for help with the baby. At this, Ruth realises her romantic fantasy of family life is not to be and makes one last appeal to her husband: "I don't want a girl", Ruth said, "I want *us* to look after our son. Not a girl, not your mother: you and me" (*LH*, p.88). Ruth's patriarchal experience of motherhood is a contributory factor in her ambivalence towards her child and her eventual breakdown.

Taking lovers also strikes at the very heart of patriarchy, as Light observes in "'Returning to Manderley': Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class".<sup>47</sup> Light considers Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca*, intrigued by the fortunes of a female character who attempts 'to live the fantasy of doing, "what she liked", living "as she liked", and who was eventually to pay for her behaviour with her life' (Light, p.15). Light observes that Rebecca was a woman who 'refused to obey the law whereby women exchange their bodies for social place' (Light, p.15). Rebecca undermined patriarchal control at every turn. She refused to stay at Manderley, taking a flat in London, or sleeping at her beach house. She refused to be sexually exclusive: 'bold, independent, cooped up with her stuffed shirt of a middle-aged playboy husband, in the middle

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<sup>47</sup> *Rebecca* demonstrates similarities to millennium texts in its depiction of the perilous nature of mixing female sexuality and motherhood.

of nowhere, in a house surrounded by grasslands and sea, Rebecca is the wife who refuses to go mad' (Light, p.18).

Maxim de Winter, however, is prepared to tolerate his wife's behaviour until she taunts him with the possibility of a child. It is the idea of the child that provokes him to murder his wife and dispose of her body at sea. Light concludes that Rebecca's 'most heinous crime' (Light, p.15) is against patriarchy, threatening Maxim with an heir to Manderley who is not his own. Since the child is imaginary, Rebecca demonstrates that she has the power to subvert the social order, appropriating Manderley for herself. Light contends that, 'what is at stake in her murder is the continuance of male authority and of masculinity itself, as it is defined through ownership and the power of hierarchy. The sexual and the social underpin each other' (Light, p.15).

Much has changed since 1938 and Light's focus in her article inevitably highlights the material and hierarchical aspects of Rebecca's betrayal. However, Light's insight also sheds light on what is at stake with regards to sexuality in motherhood, since the mother has the power to deprive a man of his children. The agony felt by a father forced to renounce his child is portrayed by Roy in *Small Things*. Chacko has been a disappointing husband, incapable of sharing the responsibility of family life. Margaret, his wife, eventually loses patience and leaves him for her lover, Joe:

she told him that she needed her own space [and] asked him for a divorce. Those last few tortured nights before he left her, Chacko would slip out of bed with a torch and



look at his sleeping child. To learn her. Imprint her on his memory. To ensure that when he thought of her, the child that he invoked would be accurate. He memorised the brown down on her soft skull. The shape of her puckered, constantly moving mouth. The spaces between her toes. (GST, p.117)

There can be no denying the intensity of love felt by a parent for its offspring. Both parents share Chacko's feelings of, 'fierce bands of love [that] tighten around his chest until he could hardly breathe' (GST, p.122). Equally, there is no denying that in the case of a divorce or separation it is common practice for the children to remain with the mother (along with the lion's share of any joint property), whoever is to blame for the breakdown of the relationship. Hence, the power that a woman wields over a man in these circumstances is considerable.

It also falls to men alone to have to consider the possibility of a child that they love not being biologically theirs. Chacko is haunted by this notion and, 'without meaning to, he found himself searching his baby for signs of Joe. The baby clutched his index finger while he conducted his insane, broken, envious, torch-lit study' (GST, p.117). It is for this reason we are traditionally conditioned to regard the sexual as being something separate and distinct from motherhood. If society was to acknowledge that sex and motherhood are intertwined, *the child itself* would be situated within the realms of female passion and therefore outside of patriarchal, and, more specifically, the father's control. It is this suspicion that has fuelled many of the taboos that surround women. In *Small Things*, Roy identifies 'unacknowledged fear' (GST, p.308) as a

powerful factor in the operation of taboo, citing 'civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness. Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify' (GST, p.308).

Culturally, if childbirth and childrearing were to be openly situated within the realms of female sexuality, society would have to acknowledge a shift in the balance of power between men and women. It is odd to reflect that, despite the fact that children are the result of sex, this connection is seldom represented, even in literature. At the most basic level, children are conceived through a penis being inserted into a vagina and mothers give birth to their children through their vaginas; mothers nourish their babies at their breast, with the baby massaging the nipple with its tongue to prompt the milk to flow, the precursor of the adult kiss. Mothers take their children to bed with them and lie entwined with them. The experiences of childbirth and early parenting revolve inescapably around those parts of the woman's body that are primarily defined as sexual, private and taboo. A unique (and therefore shocking) example in this sample of fiction of an author making an overt reference to the connection between female sexuality and the child is in Roy's *Small Things*. Rahel considers her relationship with her twin brother Estha, and reflects that he was, 'the one who had once led her (swimming) through their lovely mother's cunt' (GST, p.93).

Autonomous female sexuality, or unfettered female desire, has historically proven problematic in a patriarchal culture: and this perception

has been reflected in literature. Chase and Rogers describe the expression of female sexuality as a

tangle of meanings, desires, and experiences understood mostly in boys' and men's terms. At best, women's sexuality gets seen as different from or other than men's. When motherhood is added to the mix, sexuality disappears as a vibrant, significant dimension of women's lives. (Chase and Rogers, p.117)

In 1938, Daphne du Maurier's heroine attempted to live the fantasy of living as she liked and paid with her life. Some seventy years later, her behaviour is still in conflict with the realities of motherhood: to avoid censure, a woman must remain childless to avail herself of the opportunities sexual liberation affords her. For motherhood remains today 'a career in conformity from which no amount of subterfuge can liberate the soul without violence' (*ALW*, p.15). Literature continues to depict 'deviant wom(e)n' as Light observed in 1984, as 'the mad women in the attic' (*GST*, p.21).<sup>48</sup> By using this inherited phrase Roy draws the reader's attention to how little has changed with regard to the sexual autonomy of mothers, when Ammu's family discovers her affair with Velutha: 'Ammu was incoherent with rage and disbelief at what was happening to her – at being locked away like the family lunatic in a medieval household' (*GST*, p.252). Ammu has been aware of her

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<sup>48</sup> Light is referring to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'The Madwoman in the Attic' in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Mary Eagleton (Cambridge Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell: 1992), pp.63-69. In the afterword to French's *The Women's Room*, Faludi alludes to the literary convention of depicting dissatisfied female characters as mad. She cites the observation of novelist Nora Johnson, who read nineteen products of women's liberation fiction for the 1988 *New York Book Review* and felt compelled to remark that, 'all the housewives are mad' (French, p.518).

sexuality and of the threat it poses to her throughout the novel. She studies herself naked in the bathroom mirror, undoing

her hair and turn[ing] around to see how long it had grown. It fell, in waves and curls and disobedient frizzy wisps ... to just below where her small, strong waist began its curve out towards her hips. Moments later, she sees a wisp of madness escape from its bottle and caper triumphantly round the bathroom. Ammu worried about madness. (*GST*, p.223)

Unlike male sexual indiscretions, that can be tolerated on the basis of being able to 'disjunct sex from love. Needs from feelings' (*GST*, p.169): female desire continues to be depicted as having the power to bring the entire 'family to its knees' (*GST*, p 258).<sup>49</sup> Female passion is depicted as a force of nature, that not only falls outside of male (civilisation's) control, but outside of anyone's control. On discovery of Ammu's affair, Roy informs us that, 'the whole thing spun out of control like a deranged top [...] lash[ing] out at those who crossed its path' (*GST*, p.258).

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<sup>49</sup> Female desire has been historically and culturally portrayed as more fickle and dangerous than that of men. Popular culture supposes that men can routinely disassociate sex from love, and are capable of adultery without affecting their relationship with their wife or family. Women, however, are thought to be unable to distinguish between love and sex and therefore cannot be trusted to commit adultery without causing harm to the family. Tess in *Something* conforms to this stereotype. Tolstoy also illustrated this point of view in *Anna Karenin*. Cusk observes that with the character of Anna, Tolstoy 'excavate(d) the woman extant in the mother and demonstrate(d) her power to destroy' (*ALW*, p.15). By contrast, Tolstoy portrays Anna's brother's affair with his children's Governess, as tolerated by his household with wry affection, for 'although Oblonsky was entirely in the wrong as regards his wife, as he himself admitted, almost everyone in the house, even the nurse, Daria Alexandrovna's best friend, was on his side', Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenin* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p.17.

Female passion, literature tells us, continues to claim lives. It is interesting to note that *Small Things*, *Rebecca* and *Something Might Happen* all liken female sexual desire to untamable, deadly seas and rivers. For Roy, the river is an integral part of the geography of desire that she describes in her novel. On one side of the river is the safety of the Ayemenem family house, whilst on the other is Ammu's lover and forbidden territory, referred to by the children as 'the Heart of Darkness' (GST, p.52).<sup>50</sup> The children instinctively understand that, 'the middle of the respectable river, or the Other Side, was no place for children to Linger, Loll or Learn Things. Estha and Rahel accorded the second third and third third of the Meenachal [river] the deference it deserved' (GST, p.204). The subtext of the novel informs the reader that the innocence of children has no place on the 'other side', which is, the children believe, haunted by the ghost of a sexual deviant (in the form of an English paedophile).

A similar geography is described in *Rebecca* and *Something*. Manderley is surrounded by 'grasslands' and 'sea' (du Maurier, p.71), as is Myerson's respectable seaside town in Suffolk. One side of the town is

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<sup>50</sup> For Kristeva, 'if woman is culturally defined as the one at the margin between culture and chaos, order and anarchy, reason and the abyss, then she typifies abjection. She is the deject on the brink always of losing herself; but for culture she represents that dangerous zone against which culture must struggle to retain itself. Hence, women are sometimes reviled as too close to chaos, as outside of culture: but may then be idealized and elevated as supreme defenders against the wilderness that would envelop man' (Kaplan p.43). Weldon satirises this understanding of femininity in *Puffball*: 'Richard wanted Liffey to be the mother of his children. He wanted her, for that reason, to be separated from the rest of humanity. He wanted her to be above the sexual morass in which he, as a male, could find his proper place but she, as wife and mother, could not. He wanted her to be pure, to submit to his sexual advances, rather than enjoy them: and thus, as a sacred vessel, sanctified by his love, adoration and respect, to deliver his children unsullied into the world. It was for this reason he had offered her his worldly goods, laying them down on the altar of her purity' (P, p.95).

bordered by dangerous marshes (complete with quicksand) whilst the other side looks out on a 'sea that looks dark and aching cold. The loneliest place in the world' (*SMH*, p.263). Tess's beach hut is situated at the edge of the sea (on the edge of danger) and it is here that she engages in a series of clandestine encounters, taking her first tentative steps into the *sea of desire*. She is tempted in to the sea by the police family liaison officer, with whom she is soon to begin an affair: "I don't know what got into me", I tell him. "I've never in my life swum in November" (*SMH*, p.263).

The geography of the novels reveals sexuality in mothers as a perilous business, fraught with risk. The price to be paid for crossing the river and swimming in the sea is the ultimate price, the lives of the innocent, the children. As Tess wades, 'up to her waist [...] back on the shore, Livvy [her baby daughter] 'is suddenly small. The sun slides under a cloud and in a second the whole sea looks dark' (*SMH*, p.263). Her family is forgotten as she immerses herself in the murky depths of desire. As she lies with her lover in her beach hut, her elder daughter, Rosa, disappears. On returning to her distraught husband, he greets Tess with the words, "I was just desperately hoping she was with you somewhere. I mean, where the fuck were you, Tess?" (*SMH*, p.278). Rosa's body is later discovered washed up on the shoreline: the novel suggesting that the family's safety is irrevocably compromised by an adulterous mother.

Ammu's tale is equally cautionary. When Ammu decides to cross the river into forbidden territory she, inadvertently, takes the family's children with her. As Ammu loves 'by night the man her children loved by

day [and] use[d] by night the boat that her children used by day' (*GST*, p.44) to visit her lover, Sophie (her young niece) drowns, the 'river accepting its offering. One small life' (*GST*, p.293). Both Rosa and Sophie drown (as does Rebecca's phantom child) in the turbulent waters of female sexual desire. Their mothers' desire has caused the death of innocence, for childhood to 'tiptoe out' (*GST*, p.320). In the last sighting of Rosa before her death, she is spotted 'shouting at the sea', (*SMH*, p.307) standing above the waves, balanced on a perilous outcrop of rock. In *Small Things*, Sophie's body has

green weed and river grime [...] woven into her beautiful red-brown hair. Her sunken eyelids were raw, nibbled at by fish. (Oh yes they do, the deep swimming fish. They sample everything). Her mauve corduroy pinafore said *Holiday* in a tilting, happy font. (*GST*, p.251)

She has been defiled by her contact with the river/adult desire, blinded by seeing things that she should not see, her eyelids destroyed by the insatiability of the fish/adult passion. Roy depicts desire as a destructive force, lethal to children. As an adult, Rahel is equal to its power:

years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed. Both things had happened. It had shrunk. And she had grown. (*GST*, p124)

Recent fiction appears to continue to punish mothers for not renouncing their sexual agency for the sake of their children. This is not only true in

the case of Ammu, but also for Margaret, Ammu's ex-sister-in-law.

Margaret chooses to leave her husband (Chacko), for another man and during the course of the novel, loses both her lover and then her daughter Sophie.

Remarking on the feminist fictional heroine of the novels of the late sixties and early seventies, Faludi observes that

either she descended further into derangement and the ultimate act of self-destruction, suicide – following the well-trod path of doomed literary heroines who awaken to their true selves only to pull the plug – or she rebelled, sort of, by hopping into bed with a man-not-her-husband (or many men, in the case of Erica Jong's *Isadora*). (Faludi, p.519)

Millennium mothers are still bed hopping and, in the case of Ruth in *The Little House* and the mother in *Incendiary*, still wrestling with their mental health. However, recent fiction portrays some of these mothers as paying the ultimate price for their sexual indiscretions: the loss of the lives of their children.



## Chapter Four – A Morally Impoverished Motherhood 1995-2010

### Questioning Morality

This chapter considers motherhood as an ethical subject and argues that certain ideas pervasive during the second half of the twentieth century have contributed to an impoverishment of the experience of motherhood as reflected in the literature from the period 1995-2010. The chapter analyses the view that judgement is inherent in the will to power in ethics and posits that judgementalism has resulted in an over-simplification of motherhood, which in turn has contributed to a loss in terms of understanding, meaning and value. The literary texts and memoir considered in this thesis also reflect the late-twentieth-century pre-occupation with a scientific rather than a moral explanation of life. Hence, this thesis concludes where it began, with experiences of birth, this time from the position that medicalised birth (which accounts for the majority of the births depicted) interferes with a good birth experience, affecting bonding, love and the generation of a moral bond between a mother and her child.

Writers of motherhood fiction and memoir appear to share a moral vision, that of telling the 'truth about motherhood'. This truth is revealed through the 'we' of fellowship, from an ethical position of commonality. Recent fiction and memoir hopes to promote understanding of the difficulties of motherhood in the twenty-first century: it is not written to

provoke judgement. David Parker believes that non-judgementalism is not merely an abstract possibility, but 'one which is part of this culture's milieu and identity' (Parker, D., p.6). He cites a long tradition of spiritual and moral discrimination mediated by literature, identifying examples such as Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1603), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Contemporary writers of motherhood locate their fiction and memoir within this tradition, hoping to engender a spirit of ethical commonality in their readers. Their literature encourages a more complex, ethical appreciation of motherhood, written in opposition to culturally pervasive, judgemental interpretations of motherhood (as comprised in the frequently used terms of *good* or *bad mother*).

### **The Morality of Motherhood**

Motherhood, for many, implies a system of values, universal principles concerned with the distinction between right and wrong, good and bad behaviour. It is therefore a topic at the centre of ethical enquiry which is positioned at the heart of whichever discourse may be subscribed to as illuminating life's meanings. Eva articulates her belief in motherhood's importance in *Kevin* as an expression of 'love, story, content, faith in the whole human "thing"' (K, p.24). Franklin, the father in *Kevin*, considers childbirth in the twenty-first century in terms of its ability to help answer the philosophical question of why we are here: 'the Big Question [...] the old e-e-existential dilemma' (K, p.18). From a biological perspective, the mother is most often depicted as the place where life begins, where it is

nurtured. From a religious stance, mothers have traditionally served as a moral guide for their children, working in tandem with the church and its teachings.

For those who are indifferent to organised religion, psychology has become popular from the mid to late twentieth century as the apparatus for investigating the question of what life means? For Bywater this quest also begins with the mother: 'ever since we stopped pretending to be quite so terribly sure about God, men have been mining motherhood as the fount and origin of life and its troubles' (*SM*, p.197). The patient in psychoanalysis can identify the mother as a potential scapegoat for their own failures, and Bywater warms to this idea:

everything we don't understand about ourselves,  
everything we dislike, our faults, the unfairness of  
life, the evils of humanity, the crippling habits we  
can't quite overcome, our drinking, our sloth, our  
shyness, our difficulties with women, our emotional  
illiteracy, our failure to connect: all these we lay, like  
bailiffs' papers and threats to sue, at the door of our  
mothers. (*SM*, p.197)

The propensity to judge mothers also infects *The Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of mothering: 'to bring up (a child) with care and affection; look after kindly and protectively, sometimes excessively so'. The inclusion of the curiously out-of-place latter phrase suggests that society judges mothers who love too much, as well as too little. In his deliberations on motherhood, Bywater wonders why some children grow up to be bad adults. He considers the possibilities: 'their mothers may

have loved them, but they turned out bad? Or that their mothers didn't love them enough, or loved them too much, which is *why* they turned out bad?' (*SM*, p.195).<sup>1</sup> The universal mother is invariably the *good* mother, the mother who loves her children *just the right amount*.

### The Bad Mother

Motherhood can therefore be a morally risky undertaking for women, as it is most commonly perceived in polarities of good or bad, exposing the mother to judgement. Shriver underlines the familiarity of the *bad mother* label, attributing capital letters to the term in *Kevin* (*K*, p.68). Figes acknowledges that one of the reasons why 'the turmoil of early motherhood is still a taboo subject' (Figes, p.2) is partly because 'women fear they will be judged as bad or inadequate mothers if they say they find things difficult' (Figes, p.viii). Cusk comments that 'the demonology of parenthood is so catholic, drawing to itself epithets of "good" and "bad" that are largely absent from our experience of ordinary life' (*ALW*, p.8). With what turns out to be proleptic irony, Cusk illustrates society's penchant for judging mothers by choosing to open *A Life's Work* with an extract from *The Bad Mother* by James Hillman (1990):

As the child is timeless, eternal she [the mother] becomes one-sidedly responsible and disciplinarian. Her sense of future and hope is displaced on her actual child; thereby postpartum depression may become a chronic undertone.

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<sup>1</sup> Loving *just the right amount* is a common theme throughout texts with motherhood as their focus. Eva in *Kevin* is judged as having loved her son too little, whilst Mamanchi in Roy's *Small Things* and Lawrence's Mrs Morel in *Sons and Lovers* are judged for loving their boys too much.

As her actual child carries her feelings of vulnerability, she may over-attend to it to the neglect of herself, with consequent resentments. Also, her thought processes become restricted to adult forms of reason so that the ghost voices and faces, animals, the scenes of eidectic imagination become estranged and feel like pathological delusions and hallucinations. And her language loses its emotion and incantational power; she explains and argues.<sup>2</sup>

This quotation demonstrates how difficult it is to be judged to be a *good* mother. Cusk was judged to be a bad mother by some reviewers for reasons *opposite* to those of the bad mother described by Hillman. Cusk was criticised for over-attending to her own emotional needs to the neglect of her child.

Culturally, therefore, motherhood occupies a unique position. It is understood by many as the lynchpin in the binary opposition of good versus evil, as observed by Cusk:

as a mother you learn what it is to be both martyr and devil. In motherhood I have experienced myself as more virtuous and more terrible, and more implicated too in the world's virtue and terror, than I would, from the anonymity of childlessness, have thought possible. (*ALW*, p.8)

Ethical enquiry that is formulated around the binary opposites of good versus bad (virgin or whore) is inevitably judgmental. Significantly, it also results in a blame culture that is, as Eva observes in *Kevin*, 'simplifying,

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<sup>2</sup> James Hillman, 'The Bad Mother', in *Fathers and Mothers*, ed. by P. Berry (Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications, 1990).

not only to onlookers and victims but to culprits most of all. It imposes order on slag. Blame conveys clear lessons in which others may take comfort: *if only she hadn't* - and by implication makes tragedy avoidable' (K, p.66). This view imposes an acceptance of responsibility at a superficial level, as illustrated by Tess in Myerson's *Something*. Tess readily assumes the blame for her daughter's death (echoing Eva's contention of an over- simplified blame culture) because she was with her lover when Rosa went missing. Yet it was her husband Mick who was due to collect Rosa from school on that day, as he admits: "I had her. She was with me. I lost her" (SMH, p.297). Despite Mick's admission, Tess persists in believing that 'if only she hadn't' had an affair the tragedy would not have happened (SMH, p.66). Tess's willingness to accept the epithet of the bad mother and her desire to assume full responsibility for her daughter's death helps to re-impose a faux moral order on a random, tragic event. Her guilt may be regarded as a technique for survival, as a woman attempting 'to exercise an imaginary control of the uncontrollable' (Light, p.15). But this ready acceptance of blame also prevents other moral questions being asked: for example, why does Rosa die, why is Lennie murdered and why is Tess, a mother of four (one a baby she is still breastfeeding), having an affair when she is married to "a good, good man [...] and he's a good father", I tell him. "A really good father" (SMH, p.271). I shall return to these questions in due course.

## The Grand Either/Or

Perceiving a moral matter simply in terms of good or bad can strip it of its complexity and potentially, therefore, obscure its meaning. As Simon Haines observes 'how adequately you grasp an event determines how adequately you will judge it'.<sup>3</sup> David Parker, meditating on the turn to ethics in philosophy and literary criticism in the 1990s, asserts that 'judgementalism (or "moralism") is a permanent possibility within ethics' (Parker, D., p.6). Culturally, the moral aspect of motherhood is commonly considered in terms of choosing between a set of false alternatives. Thus Rozsika Parker observes that the real-life mother is most often perceived as deciding between 'independence and dependence, between self-assertion and self-abnegation and between love and hate' (Parker, R., p.13). Richard Bernstein describes being forced to choose between false alternatives as the 'grand Either/Or'.<sup>4</sup> Ethical thought that is based on binary opposites has therefore contributed to a culture that has oversimplified motherhood, resulting in a loss of meaning. And, as the fictional examples discussed here demonstrate, blame is eagerly attributed to those mothers perceived to have got it wrong.

Moral judgements that are based on 'the binary opposition of my group "good", the Other and her group "evil"', (Parker, D., p. 6) add weight to Nietzsche's assertion that it is *the will to power*, as opposed to *the will to truth*, that lies behind the existing intellectual traditions of the

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Haines, 'Deepening the Self' in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, ed. by Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.21-39 (p.28).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), p.9. Cited by David Parker, p.4.

establishment, as discussed in chapter two. It is this cultural tendency toward the 'logic of binary oppositions' (Benhabib, p.15) that has encouraged a judgemental as opposed to an ethical interpretation of motherhood, which has in turn contributed to a loss of depth and understanding of the mother as a subject. Moreover, this polarisation of moral debate often circumvents debate itself. On a superficial level, for example, 'Either/Or' ignores the feminist issue of why it is mothers (as opposed to fathers) who should be forced to choose between, as Rozsika Parker suggests, 'independence and dependence, between self-assertion and self-abnegation and between love and hate' (Parker, R., p.13). More importantly, the question of why such choices still exist within contemporary society remains largely unarticulated.

### **The Moral Dimension of Literature**

The motherhood fiction and memoir considered in this thesis pose, in a variety of different ways, the questions of *what is the truth about motherhood or how can mothers and their children live a good life*.

Nussbaum considers 'living a good life' one of 'the organising questions of moral philosophy' (Parker, D., p.3). These questions arise in these texts because mothers do not feel that they and their children are, in general, living a *good* life. There are markedly few instances of human flourishing through mothering in this selection of motherhood fiction and



memoir. The joys of motherhood are included as an aside, in the phrase 'I love my children but'.<sup>5</sup>

David Parker argues that literature is, historically, well suited to the type of enquiry concerned with living a good life. Pointing to critical traditions informed by Aristotle, Pope, Dr Johnson, Matthew Arnold, Henry James, F.R. Leavis, and Lionel Trilling, he argues that we, as readers, expect our literature to offer 'both ethical interpretation and moral insight' (Parker, D., p.2). Indeed, Parker argues that 'what we think important enough to call "literature" in the first place will be partly constituted by the demand that works offer such insight' (Parker, D., p.2). In a similar vein (but from a different perspective), White asserts that events recorded in 'narrative appear to be real precisely insofar as they belong to an order of moral existence, just as they derive their meaning from their placement in this order' (White, p.23). Narrative closure, he concludes, consists of 'the passage from one moral order to another' (White, p.23).

In literary terms, David Parker asserts therefore, that "what does it mean?" [...] is a coded demand that we talk about the moral conflicts of the hero' (Parker, D., p.9); in this instance the mother. Similarly, Cusk appreciates the insight that literature can provide. Searching for answers following the birth of her first child, she returns to her favourite books 'like someone visiting old haunts after an absence I read books that I have read before, books that I love, and when I do I find them changed: they give the impression of having contained all along everything that I have

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<sup>5</sup> This quotation is taken from the book jacket of the 1<sup>st</sup> paperback edition of Rachel Cusk's memoir, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002).

gone away to learn' (*ALW*, p.122). Literature is understood by these writers and critics in terms of either providing answers or articulating the search for answers to life's big questions. The motherhood literature emerging 1995-2010 shares a desire to discover how a mother and her children can flourish in a society that is not set up to meet their needs.

### **Work and Motherhood**

Contemporary representations of motherhood examine the perception of moral questions in terms of right and wrong, good versus bad. This exploration consistently centres on two focal points of moral dilemma: work and sex. Taking the discussion of work first, Simpson's 'Lentils and Lilies' poses the question of whether mothers should work and leave the raising of their children to paid help.<sup>6</sup> This short story addresses the question from the child's point of view, with Jade perceiving herself to have been, in the absence of her mother, 'dragged up by a string of au pairs' (*HY*, p.3). In a subsequent story, 'Burns and the Bankers', Simpson returns to the question of the moral aspect of working mothers from Jade's mother's perspective. Nicola acknowledges that, as a successful career woman,

every minute had been spoken for. Her chargeable hours were on target so far this year but it was a constant battle. She hadn't managed a full half-hour with the children this morning: it couldn't be helped but it made her feel a bit sick considering she was out tonight again for the second time this week and it was only Wednesday. Jade was so sarcastic these days

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<sup>6</sup> Helen Simpson, 'Lentils and Lilies', in *Hey Yeah*, pp.1-9.

but she liked the benefits, the good school, the nice holidays. She, Nicola, would make up the twenty-minute short-fall, she would squeeze it in somehow tomorrow. (HY, p.79)

Nicola's reverie exposes just how little time her successful career permits her to spend with her children: whilst Jade's sarcastic behaviour suggests the negative impact of an absentee mother.

It is indisputable that feminism has changed the lot of mothers for the better. Here Forster acknowledges her debt to the movement in her family history *Hidden Lives*,

It gives me such satisfaction to prove, to myself at least, what I hoped was true *is* true – my chances, my lot, my expectations, born as I was into a working-class family in which women had always served rather than led, were always hundreds of times better than my grandmother's or mother's. All of us, all three representatives of different generations, always have put family first but in my case, in the case of my generation, it has not been at ruinous cost. I'm not, and haven't been, crippled by the family. I don't pay an enormous emotional price for having one. I have been able to be myself within its confines. (Forster, p.305)<sup>7</sup>

Yet, to achieve this degree of success, feminist political discourse does not, in the main, emphasise the intense pleasures of motherhood, those feelings of intimacy, empathy, value and love. The emotional relationship

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<sup>7</sup> Although one cannot dispute Forster's contention that women's lives have greatly improved in recent history, her sense of freedom in motherhood can in part be attributed to the fact that she is in a privileged situation as a writer. Unlike the majority of working mothers, her profession enables her to work at home and at times to suit her and her family. By contrast, Pearson's character Kate in *How She Does It* (2002) finds a career and motherhood eventually irreconcilable and this is also the case for Simpson's character Dorie in 'Hey Yeah' (2001) and Shriver's character of Eva in *Kevin* (2003).

between mother and child is not foregrounded because to emphasise the pleasurable aspects of mothering, its value and rewards in human terms, summons the spectre of the mother as an ethical figure, which can be used to support arguments against equal rights. For if children and mothers derive so much emotional and physical satisfaction from each other, how can their separation for much of the working week be justified?

Pearson's *How She Does It* exposes the difficulties that the concept of equal rights poses for mothers and children, as Kate laments, 'what is the cost when you pay someone else to be a mother to your children? Has anyone calculated it? I'm not talking about money. The money's a lot, but how much is the other thing?' (*HSD*, p.203). The 'other thing' is what has been swept under the carpet since mothers entered the workplace, why so many new mothers report feeling that they have been 'fobbed off with half-truths' or shut out of what the experience of motherhood is really like by what Figes calls 'a conspiracy of silence' (Figes, p.3).

The 'other thing' is the perception of the mother as an ethical figure. *How She Does It* is concerned with excavating this mother from the impossible expectation of being able to *have it all*. The novel establishes that inequalities still exist between mothers and fathers: 'take that word parents, for example. When [the school] write[s] the word "parents" what they really mean, what they still mean, is mothers' (*HSD*, p.4). Intellectually, the novel acknowledges that both parents owe an equal duty of care to a child they have brought into the world, but in practice it reveals a society organised, as Figes puts it, for men to

continue, 'living and working in the world in much the same way as they have always done [...] [whilst] women suddenly have the cultural expectations of motherhood to live up to' (Figes, p.5).

*How She Does It* exposes the conflict that exists between work and motherhood by confronting a child's need for its mother, and the mother's wish to be there for her child. The novel suggests that Kate's emancipation has been achieved, in part, by ignoring the unique and valuable position that she holds in her children's lives and vice versa. When Kate's daughter is in childcare, her carer reports that

Emily had cried constantly, save for an hour, when they had watched a video of *Sleeping Beauty* that seemed to comfort her. That day my daughter formed her first sentence: 'Want go home.' But I was not there to hear it, nor was I at the home where she so badly wanted to go. (*HSD*, p.89)

Pearson's novel suggests that to ignore the daily need for intimacy between parent and child is to do both a disservice, as Kate realises when she is eventually forced to relinquish her high-pressured role in the city:

I know my daughter a little better these days. A couple of months after leaving work, I realised that all those carefully timetabled bedtime chats had told me nothing about what was really going on in Em's head. That stuff comes out spontaneously, you can't force it. You just have to be around when it happens. (*HSD*, p.350)

To promote notions such as 'quality-time' and the idea that it is easy to express milk in the toilet cubicle at work is to misrepresent motherhood to a generation of women.<sup>8</sup> Kate concedes that her children have not

grasped the principle of quality time [...] after the holidays, I always sense a special edge to the children's neediness. Far from being satisfied by the time we've had together they seem famished, as ravenous for my attentions as newborns. It's as though the more they have of me, the more they are reminded about how much they want. (*HSD*, p.69)

In the past it may have been necessary for feminism to downplay the need of child and parent for one another, in order to attain a mother's right to work. One cannot underestimate the difficulties (described here by Forster) involved in changing a society where it was the custom that

jobs were traded for children and that was that. No good moaning, no good spending even a moment's resentment wishing they could have kept their jobs *and* had the boys. That was not how the world worked, their world, the world for women in the 1930s. (Forster, p.100)

In reality, however, Kate's work does not appear to accommodate women who wish to keep their careers and have children. Kate is forced to relinquish her job in the city because, 'chauvinism is the air I breathe' (*HSD*, p.124). She questions the value of the equal opportunities

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<sup>8</sup> This idea was promoted by the Government run 'Breast is Best' campaign. In *How She Does It* Pearson demonstrates a lack of support for such an arrangement in the workplace. In response to Chris Bunce putting 'a shot of vodka in the expressed breast milk I was storing in the office fridge next to the lifts', Kate approaches Personnel to advise as to what course of action she should take. 'I can still see the moue of distaste on Celia's face and it wasn't for that bastard Bunce. "Use your feminine wiles, dear", she said' (*HSD*, p.24).

legislation: 'doesn't make it better; just drives the misogyny underground' (*HSD*, p.124). Kate cannot be late for work because of a family emergency as her 'senior managers would be frankly appalled by the story of a vomiting nocturnal baby or an AWOL nanny (mysteriously, childcare, though paid for by both parents is always deemed to be the female's responsibility)' (*HSD*, p.17). However, she can offer a far more trivial explanation of a car alarm going off and interrupting her sleep because, although it displays, 'female symptoms – hair trigger unpredictability, high pitched shrieking – they are attached to a man's excuse (the car) and can be taken to a garage and fixed' (*HSD*, p.17).

More importantly, Kate's daughter is similarly unsympathetic to her mother's plight: 'unfortunately, the case of equal opportunities, long established in liberal Western society, cuts no ice in the fundamentalist regime of the five-year-old. There is no God but mummy' (*HSD*, p.10). To pretend it is possible for a woman to have a successful career and be able to be the mother she wants to be for her children is to refuse to acknowledge the difficulties working women face: and most significantly, is to deny them the possibility of resolving them satisfactorily.

Kate eventually solves her dilemma by resigning from her job to set up a global dolls' house business. Kate's choice of career can be read as an ironic reference to Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (1879). When it premiered the play scandalised audiences because its central female character, Nora, concludes her dramatic journey by rejecting marriage and motherhood. In 2002, Pearson subverts Ibsen's ending with Kate's reaffirming her commitment to her marriage and her children: she, in

effect, returns to the dolls' house. The novel's conclusion is disappointing, as it attempts to soften the tragedy of Kate's failure to 'have it all' by offering Kate the opportunity to 'have it all' in a different format: Kate's dolls' house mail order company satisfies her need to work whilst allowing her to spend much more time with her children. Moreover, Kate's solution is a fantasy (as it is not one available to the masses). This opportunity is unique to Kate's privileged position as an ex-fund manager, as she is amongst the minority who has the business know-how for such a venture or the contacts to secure the necessary financial backing. That aside, Pearson concludes the novel with a compromise, with Kate developing a more part-time role for herself so that she can prioritise her role of homemaker for her children over her work.<sup>9</sup>

From an equal rights perspective, this conclusion is frustrating, as Kate has to forgo a career she loves, that gives her 'the synapse-snapping satisfaction of being good at it' (*HSD*, p.18) because society as yet cannot accommodate what is good for her *and* her children. Pearson's conclusion reveals that, even in fiction, a genuine solution to the career versus family for women has yet to be found. Kate rails at the disingenuous nature of the reality that confronts her: 'back in the seventies when they were fighting for women's rights, what did they think equal opportunities meant: that women would spend as little time with

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<sup>9</sup> In *How She Does It* Pearson exposes the idea of part-time work in the City as bogus. When Kate resigns, her Head of Investment and long-time friend, Robin, tries to dissuade her: "maybe part-time?" he ventures with a ghost of a smile. "I've seen what happens when a woman tries to go part-time, Robin. They say she's having one of her days off. And then they cut her out of the loop. And then they take her funds away from her, one by one, because everyone knows that managing money's a full-time job" (*HSD*, p.342).



their kids as men do?' (*HSD*, p.273). Kate feels doubly aggrieved as she feels she has been misled by the notion of equality:

for my generation, coming to it later and sometimes too late, motherhood was a shock. Sacrifice wasn't written into our contract. After fifteen years as an independent adult, the sudden lack of liberty could be as stunning as being parted from a limb; entwined with the intense feeling of love for your baby was a thin thread of loss, and maybe we will always ache like an amputee. (*HSD*, p.293)

*How She Does It* does not offer any real answers for those who love their jobs and want to be there for their children because the truth is that there are few answers available. The ethical argument of the novel is that the duty of care owed to children has to be met and, with all things being *unequal*, Pearson appears to endorse the idea of self-sacrifice on the part of the mother. Pearson's depiction of the mother as an ethical figure hinges on the leitmotif of Captain Oates's sacrifice of himself for the well-being of others, or as Kate expresses it, he was 'the one who walked out of the tent to certain death' (*HSD*, p.84). At first, Kate believes his sacrifice to be futile but her view changes as the novel progresses. When Kate finally concedes that, "not all self-sacrifice is meaningless", her friend Candy sanctions Kate's assertion with, "you're beautiful when you're ethical" (*HSD*, p.318).

Kate's decision to relinquish her career is reached, somewhat implausibly, with advice from her taxi driver, Winston. Winston, the reader is informed, later graduates from taxi driving to 'take his degree in

philosophy at the University of East London and his ethics dissertation, "How Do We Know What Is Right?" achieved the highest mark in the year' (*HSD*, p.348). The novel's conclusion and Winston's focus on ethics suggests that, in an imperfect, unequal world, Kate finally 'knows what is right', to use Martha Nussbaum's terminology from *Love's Knowledge*.<sup>10</sup> The premature death of a colleague's wife reminds Kate of what matters most in life, realising that, 'in death, we are not defined by what we did or who we were, but by what we meant to others. How well we loved and were loved in return' (*HSD*, p.231). Despite her being, 'the main breadwinner in our house' (*HSD*, p.59) and having a more successful career than her husband, it is Kate who must put family first.<sup>11</sup>

### **Morality Tales for the Millennium: Sex, Motherhood and the Death of the Innocent**

The other dominant theme of recent novels is whether it is morally permissible (in terms of the duty of care mothers owe to their children) for mothers to engage in adulterous relationships. It is interesting that current depictions of the sexual dilemmas that confront mothers appear to have remained unchanged over the last hundred years, despite the political and social transformations that have granted women the right to vote, divorce, own property and to work. Margaret and Ammu in *Small*

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<sup>10</sup> Nussbaum asserts that novels perform a unique function in responding to the question of how we should live. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.48.

<sup>11</sup> All protagonists discussed here have to give up what they hold dear (to un-self) for the sake of their children. What is difficult to ascertain is whether these conclusions are the result of an ethical imperative or whether they result from judgements arising from established discourses. *How She Does It* reveals how prevalent such discourses are in mothers' everyday lives: 'I swear to God that every month there's been some new research proving that my child wrecks my career prospects or, more painfully, my work wrecks my child's prospects' (*HSD*, p.178).

*Things* (1997), the character of Tess in *Something* (2003), the mother in *Incendiary* (2005) and Tonie in *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009), for example, are examinations of the same question posed by *Madame Bovary* (1857), *East Lynne* (1861) and *Anna Karenin* (1873).<sup>12</sup> Too much sex, just as much as too much work, continues to define the bad mother in culture and, therefore, in literature. By contrast, these activities continue to define a powerful, successful man; being a father remains incidental to a man's working habits or sexual appetite. However, a feminist perspective distracts from the more fundamental moral issue of the duty of care owed to children.

The novels under discussion could be perceived as straightforward morality tales: tales where the moral compass involves what Kaplan describes as 'over-valuing [the mother] for her sacrifices or denigrating her for her failures' (Kaplan, p.39). These texts feature mothers who cannot accept that it is 'necessary to be devoured' by motherhood (*HY*, p.41). Their tragic conclusions often involve the death or injury of a child, and appear therefore to collude with the belief that a family's safety is jeopardised by a mother who is distracted, however momentarily, by her *self*: a belief emphasised, so tragically, by the fate of Margaret's daughter in *Small Things*. Following the death of her long-term partner Joe, Margaret decides to visit her child's father, Chacko, in his homeland of Malaysia. During her stay, she and Chacko reconcile and decide to

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<sup>12</sup> Despite the work of John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman concluding that post the swinging sixties 'sex has become resistant to efforts at containment', Chase and Rogers observed that 'in only one institutional arena did the containment of sex persist. The institution of motherhood remained a de-sexualised stronghold undercutting women's sexual agency'. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.356. Cited in Chase and Rogers, p.117.

return to England to raise their daughter Sophie, together. Tragically, Sophie drowns whilst her mother is momentarily distracted by building this new life for herself. Roy informs the reader that Margaret, 'never forgave herself for taking Sophie Mol to Ayemenem. For leaving her there alone over the weekend while she and Chacko went to Cochin to confirm their return tickets' (*GST*, p.251). Margaret's loss is total:

when Margaret Kochamma saw her little daughter's body, shock swelled in her [and] overflowed in a wave of vomit that left her mute and empty eyed. She mourned two deaths, not one. With the loss of Sophie, Joe died again [...] She had come to Ayemenem to heal her wounded world, and had lost all of it instead. She shattered like glass. (*GST*, p.263)

Roy's fiction thus appears to collude with the notion that children are the victims of a mother distracted by her own needs. Sophie's drowning could also be considered as a consequence of Ammu taking a lover. When Ammu's affair is revealed, her children and Sophie slip away unnoticed from the family home to cross the dangerous river by night by boat: 'in the chaos that ensued [...] nobody could remember when they had last seen the children. They hadn't been uppermost on anybody's mind. They could have been missing all night' (*GST*, p.252). Ammu's preoccupation with her lover also enables the proprietor of the local cinema to sexually abuse her son Estha, without Ammu picking up on the obvious, tell-tale signs as to what has been happening. With deliberate irony, the distracted Ammu makes Estha thank his abuser. From that day forward, Estha makes a mental note that 'Anything Can Happen To

Anyone' (GST, p.266) as he no longer feels secure under his mother's protection. It is because of his abuse, that the children establish a hide-away for themselves across the river, and it is whilst running away from the uproar at home to the supposed safety of their camp across the river, that their boat overturns and Sophie drowns.

### **The Will to Power and the Punishment of Otherness in Literature**

The loss of a child could be seen as a literary moral judgement on the adulterous or self-obsessed mother. There is a long tradition of punishing errant wives in literature. In her preface to *The Women's Room*, French observes that 'literary conventions are not mere technical devices; they are expressions of cultural laws' (p.xii). These conventions, she maintains, 'are formulas accepted by both author and audience as symbolising the basic truths in their society. They are most powerful in the areas of greatest confusion and ambiguity - gender, race and class' (p.x). In other words, the will to power is inherent in literature: Jameson argues that literature always comes to its audience through what he describes as the 'sedimented reading habits and categories developed by [...] inherited interpretive traditions'.<sup>13</sup> Judgement is an obvious outcome of any discourse pervasive enough to define *what can be said* in a given culture. The risk associated with being judged a bad mother, to become the Other is onerous. Roy illustrates the consequences of such a verdict through the fate of Ammu in *Small Things*. Following her family's discovery of her affair Ammu is initially locked up: and following the death

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<sup>13</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, p.9.

of Sophie, she is then cast out of the family home and separated from her children. Unable to keep herself financially, Ammu quickly descends into poverty and ill health, and her subsequent ignominious death is the one culture's reserve for the dispossessed:

the church refused to bury Ammu. On several counts. So Chacko hired a van to transport the body to the electric crematorium. He had her wrapped in a dirty bed sheet and laid out on a stretcher [...] over the jarring bumps and potholes in the road, Ammu's body jiggled and slid off the stretcher. Her head hit an iron bolt on the floor. She didn't wince or wake up. (GST, p.162)

Beautiful, rebellious Ammu has been condemned by her family, village, the church, to the fate of the Other.

With Rosa's drowning in *Something*, Myerson's narrative also appears to uphold the notion explicit in the novel's title, that *Something Might Happen* if a mother takes her 'eye off the ball for that split second – which is, after all, all it takes to lose just about everything you care about' (SMH, p.322). Tess's punishment is swift and severe with the death of her daughter. However, both *Small Things* and *Something* are a comment on the unrealistic demands placed on mothers across cultures as opposed to an indication of blame. In *Kevin*, Eva also loses her family, career, fortune, home and standing in the community by being judged a bad mother. Yet she perceives her failure as a consequence of society's impossible expectations of mothers:

have you any notion how fatiguing it is to keep an eye

on a small child every single moment of every single day?  
 I'm tremendously sympathetic with the sort of diligent  
 mother who turns her back for an eye blink – who leaves  
 a child in the bath to answer the door and sign for a package,  
 to scurry back only to discover that her little girl has hit her  
 head on the faucet and drowned in two inches of water. Two  
 inches. Does anyone ever give the woman credit for their  
 twenty-four hours minus three minutes a day that she watched  
 that child like a hawk? For the months, the *years'* worth of  
 don't-put-that-in-your-mouth sweeties. Of whoops!-we-almost-  
 fell-downs? Oh, no. We prosecute these people, we call  
 it 'criminal parental negligence' and drag them to court  
 through the snot and the salty tears of their own grief.  
 Because only the three minutes count, those three  
 miserable minutes that were just enough. (K, p.157)

### **Mothers on Trial**

Forna argues in *Mother of All Myths* that the 1990s bore witness to 'a political and social backlash against mothers and turned motherhood into a moral touchstone for a myriad of malaises' (Forna, p.2). She cites the real-life experiences of mothers who have, in her opinion, been unduly criticised by society: the mother of murdered toddler Jamie Bulger, who lost her child in a Liverpool shopping centre and Deborah Eappen, the mother of the baby 'shaken' to death by au pair Louise Woodward; and even the Queen, whose 'cold and distant' mothering was blamed for her sons' divorces.<sup>14</sup> Fornia contends that successive Governments routinely

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<sup>14</sup> Fornia comments on the real-life case of Mathew Eappen, the small child who died in the care of au-pair Louise Woodward in 1997. 'For many people, from the very beginning, [the mother] was the person on trial and not Woodward, because she chose to work three days a week as an ophthalmologist instead of being a full-time mother [...] people carried placards in front of the court bearing the words, "Don't Blame the Nanny. Blame the Mother!" [...] people ignored the fact that Mathew had another parent who

place 'the placebo of family values [...] at the top of the political and social agenda [when] under pressure to provide solutions' (Forna, p.14). From a social/political/cultural perspective, families (and in particular single mothers) have been identified as an important contributory factor in perpetuating society's ills. The breakdown of the nuclear family and working mothers are often cited in popular debates concerning truancy, delinquency, ASBOs or poor diet. Currently, real-life mothers risk imprisonment if their children fail to attend school regularly. They also risk having their children taken into care if they are obese.<sup>15</sup> Because of this 'buck stops with [the mother]' culture, Fornia argues that the mother develops a heightened sense of her importance to her child, which, in turn, ensures a greater degree of susceptibility on the part of the mother to become subject to the maternal sacrifice narrative.<sup>16</sup> For the mother

sees herself as absolutely indispensable and no one else, except perhaps a carefully vetted nanny, is entirely trusted to take care of her child. To non-mothers she appears ridiculous, but she is driven by guilt and fear, and cannot see how excessive her own actions are. In this lies the makings of a tragedy. (Fornia, p.13)

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was also a doctor. It was left to Sunil Eappen to defend his wife, because she could not defend herself and because he, merely the father, was not seen to be at fault. The baby died because *she* wasn't there' (Fornia, p.2).

<sup>15</sup> Although parents are responsible for their children's nutrition, factors such as low incomes and the Government's failure to legislate against a multi-million pound food industry that advertises unhealthy food to children, combined with supermarkets that place sweets at check-out counters and sanction food labelling systems that mislead the consumer with low-fat claims, whilst adding sugar, are also responsible for nutritional problems. BBC Television News Report, 8 October 2009.

<sup>16</sup> John S. Dacey and Lisa B. Fiore, *The Safe Child Handbook: How to Protect your Family and Cope with Anxiety in a Threat-Filled World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).



Pearson's novel reflects this view, with Kate suggesting that mothers alone are hotwired into the needs and safety-requirements of their children: 'nature gives Mother an advance-warning system and Mother is convinced that no minder or man can match her for speed or anticipation' (*HSD*, p.10). Novels such as *Something* and *Small Things* depict the type of tragedies that culturally mothers are expected to prevent.

Shriver's novel *Kevin* highlights the litigious and discriminatory nature of a society that has identified motherhood as a potential defendant, with Eva standing trial in a civil court for the murderous actions of her son. Culturally, we continue to understand the mother as solely responsible for 'raising [the children] to know what's right' (*K*, p.10). Having identified the mother's importance to society's ethical centre, the culture of mother-blame has flourished, as it has done since the eighteenth century. In common with other commentators on motherhood, Forna identifies the culture of mother-blaming as having been fostered by 'Freud and the psychoanalysts who followed and developed his theories – John Bowlby and D.W. Winnicott in particular [who] emphasised the mother's role and her competence in a way that had never been considered before' (Forna, p.6). She historicises further to include Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas of child-rearing (first articulated in *Emile* in 1762), as instrumental in establishing the motherhood-discourse which still has influence over our perceptions of what constitutes a good mother. In *Motherhood and Representation*, Kaplan also emphasises Rousseau's contribution to our understanding of motherhood. She argues that it was Rousseau's regime of total attention to the child that helped to establish a

conception of childhood as a long preparation for adulthood, carefully overseen by a devoted and dedicated mother. Kaplan cites Rousseau's contention that, 'mothers have as powerful an influence over the welfare of future generations as all other causes combined' (Kaplan, p.20).<sup>17</sup>

In *Kevin*, Eva meets another mother in the waiting room of the Claverack maximum security unit for juvenile offenders. Together, these mothers struggle under the weight of society's judgement of them as *bad* mothers. They enjoy a rare moment of camaraderie, for Loretta Greenleaf shares Eva's ignoble position of being a mother of a serial killer. She also shares the knowledge that

'it's always the mother's fault, ain't it?' she said softly, collecting her coat. 'That boy turn out bad cause his mama a drunk, or a she a junkie. She let him run wild, she don't teach him right from wrong. She never home when he back from school. Nobody ever say his daddy a drunk, or his daddy not home after school. And nobody else ever say they some kids just damned mean. Don't you believe that old guff. Don't you let them saddle you with all that killing'. (*K*, p.168)

Thus Shriver identifies the inequity of a blame culture that is prepared to discriminate against the mother whilst exhibiting markedly less interest in the father's role in the child's upbringing. *Kevin* explores the extent to which mothers in particular can be held responsible for their 'worthless little bastards' (*K*, p.10). It is significant that Franklin is absent in real terms throughout the course of the novel. However, by permitting feminist discourse to dominate the discussion, once again, the more

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (1762), trans. by B. Foxley (London: Dent, 1974).

important question of how Eva (or Franklin) could have parented Kevin remains largely undebated in the text. Political feminism has largely side-stepped the fact that *someone* has to look after and be responsible for the children. Making fathers take more of their fair share of childcare is undoubtedly a just cause, but ignores the fact that as society is currently structured, neither parent can sustain a career whilst sharing childcare duties equally.

### **A Noble Sacrifice or Sacrificial Lamb? The Ethics of Self and Unselfing**

There are indubitable moral arguments that underpin the maternal sacrifice narrative. To hold on to the self can inhibit a mother from truly paying attention to her child, in all its particularity. Empathy is most often born of understanding: and it is difficult to hurt or betray that with which one deeply empathises. As an un-selfed human being, one does not have to decide to act morally – one just does. Giving birth can be viewed as a potentially crucial moment of moral enlightenment. Hannah Fink, in her short autobiographical account of a stillbirth 'Living Death' (2001), appears to support this notion: 'the capacity [...] for empathy – often arrives at a loss of self'.<sup>18</sup> In 'Tales of the Recent Past', Gemmell also considers her forthcoming child in moral terms:

in a couple of months I will never again control my life  
with the tight fist I have always been used to. I will  
have to surrender to the will of someone else. A child

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<sup>18</sup> Hannah Fink, 'Living Death: An Online Elegy', in *GA*, pp. 235-48, (p.243).

will drag me into life. I could be distant, remote,  
without one. As a parent I have to participate. (GA, p.220)

A tension evidently exists between the moral argument for un-selfing in motherhood and a feminist social constructionist interpretation of self-sacrifice. Central to the moral conflict in the representations of motherhood discussed in this thesis is the notion of self, and the idea that self-sacrifice is a prerequisite of *good* mothering. In Simpson's short story 'Hey Yeah', Dorrie concludes that motherhood forces 'the free-standing, feisty girls' to 'cross the ego line' (HY, p.37): and that to be a good mother she must accept 'obliteration, of her particular mind, of her own relish for things [...] she must let it gnaw at her entrails like some resident tiger' (HY, p.57). Whichever discourse has been in the ascendant, be it spiritual, political, psychological (in terms of individuation theory) or scientific, the message for mothers has remained largely unchanged: give of yourself.

The influence of the self-sacrificing ideal is demonstrated by how receptive Shriver's Eva in *Kevin* is to assuming responsibility for her son's murderous outburst. She suspects Kevin turned out bad because she wasn't selfless enough. Likewise the mother in *Incendiary* does not blame Osama Bin Laden for the suicide bombing of Arsenal's football stadium that killed her husband and son; she blames herself instead because of her extra-marital relationship with Jasper Black: 'I loved my husband and my boy but I waved them goodbye and I took you home and had sex with you on the bloody sofa didn't I. And then my life blew up. I didn't deserve my husband and my boy. I'm a slut. I'm a madwoman' (I,

p.105). She perceives the death of her husband and child as a direct result of her indiscretion, believing that, 'I was weak and I cheated and I was punished' (*I*, p.105), despite Jasper's protestations to the contrary: "Oh please. You loved your husband and your boy. That was never in question and what you did with me had nothing to do with it" (*I*, p.105).

These novels depict a form of cultural mutilation of the mother's psyche; mothers are culturally conditioned to accept blame. They also allude to a conventional, sexual morality left over from an earlier time: a discourse that is out-dated, and is not ethically, but politically motivated for the control of women. This anachronistic morality is not time or culture specific, it is encoded in the moral order of recent texts. Feminist discussion has highlighted how patriarchy has a vested interest in the sexual control of women, especially mothers.

### **Self, Sex and the Death of the Rival Consciousness**

Self-sacrifice is so entrenched in the persecutory cultural ideal of what makes a good mother, that bad mothers are defined by their disinclination to acquiesce to this style of mothering. Sex has therefore remained central to depictions of the bad mother as sex is an immutable expression of self. Culturally, therefore, sexual behaviour in mothers has been met with particular resistance because sexuality is harder to subdue and harder to regulate since it exists as part of one's interior life (and is usually secret). Hence, Chase and Rogers conclude that 'the pursuit of sexual gratification [...] is antithetical to the kind of altruism expected of mothers' (Chase and Rogers, p.32).

Roy depicts Ammu's sexuality in *Small Things* as giving her character its defined sense of self. She demands that she is acknowledged as an individual and as a woman by her family and her children, not merely as their mother. She grows tired of her children's

proprietary handling of her. She wanted her body back. It was hers. She shrugged her children off the way a bitch shrugs off her pups when she's had enough of them. She sat up and twisted her hair into a knot at the nape of her neck. (GST, p.222)

Roy associates Ammu's sexuality with her 'Unsafe edge' (GST, p.321). It is when Ammu

listened to songs that she loved on the radio, something stirred inside her. A liquid ache spread under her skin, and she walked out of the world like a witch, to a better, happier place. On days like this, there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcehood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. (GST, p.44)

Ammu's sexuality is the catalyst that transports her beyond the 'laws that lay down who should be loved and how' (GST, p.31), to a place where 'mothers [become] lovers' (GST, p.31). 'On the days that the radio played Ammu's songs, everyone was a little wary of her. They sensed she lived in the penumbral shadows between two worlds, just beyond the grasp of their power' (ST, p.44). Sex takes Ammu beyond what Kaplan describes as 'the codes that hem us in, define what is and what is not

possible, define our place in culture' (Kaplan, p.49). Ammu's sexuality makes her that 'unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber' (*GST*, p.44). It is her sexuality that eventually lights the blue touch paper, for patriarchy has made Ammu into 'a bomb waiting to go off' (*GST*, p.119). On first reading, therefore, Roy appears to be suggesting that sexuality is morally incompatible with being a *good* mother.

However, Roy's fiction demonstrates that children die in a world created by men for men. Although *Small Things* is set in a legalised patriarchy, with different cultural practices from the other novels considered here, features of Ammu and Margaret's experiences are nonetheless representative of a type of fictional portrayal of sexually proactive women. Patriarchal society has been very cruel to Ammu: as a female, she is refused an education and an inheritance. Ownership of the family business and property passes from father to son and Chacko, Ammu's brother, constantly reminds her of this fact, referring pointedly to 'My house, my pineapples, my pickles' (*GST*, p.255). Her father and husband beat her, the latter's escalating violence prompting her return to her family home: 'when his bouts of drunken violence began to include the children [...] Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything she had fled from only a few years ago' (*GST*, p.42).

Ammu returns because, with limited earning potential and no childcare, she cannot support her children single-handedly. In a patriarchal system, children remove choice from women's lives.

Therefore, the child's meaning therefore can be distorted for the mother. It is patriarchy that has created a 'millstone' system, with Chacko reminding Ammu that she and her children 'Estha and Rahel were millstones around his neck' (GST, p.85): an attack Ammu herself tragically uses against her own children. Through her locked bedroom door she berates them: "if it weren't for you I would be free. I should have dumped you in an orphanage the day you were born. You are the millstones round my neck" (GST, p.290).

### **Motherhood in Crisis**

The taking of lovers in these texts is shown as a response to patriarchy (whether that patriarchy is legally sanctioned or culturally endemic): a symptom rather than a cause of the tragedies that follow. Superficially, these fictions present a judgemental view of motherhood but a closer reading demands a more ethical interpretation of how women and children are currently being restricted *from living a good life*. Tales of millennium motherhood fiction depict avoidable tragedies, rather than the punishment of errant wives.

The *Something Might Happen* of Myerson's title could refer to the consequences arising from mothers not being permitted to live a good life. For Lennie is not the only mother to have her heart ripped out during the novel. Whereas Lennie is mutilated physically, Tess is torn apart emotionally by the death of her daughter. As mothers, both Lennie's and Tess's fates are interchangeable: both have chosen to become mothers and in so doing have, figuratively as well as literally, hidden themselves



away in a respectable little backwater, described by the guide books as 'the happiest and most picturesque seaside town' (*SMH*, p.47). The institution of motherhood and the town share the same meaning in the text. Rejecting the romantic description of the town, Tess tells us that, 'the thing about this place is, it isn't on the way to anywhere. It's the end of the road, a dead end' (*SMH*, p.46). Significantly, it is Lennie, the more conformist of the two women, who convinces Tess that she could 'make a go of it here' (*SMH*, p.46).

With Lennie's murder, Tess's family is investigated and supported by the police, and the officer assigned to them is Ted Lacey. Lacey's true significance in the text is made apparent by his title: "I'm called family liaison [...] I'm with the police", he begins again, "but I deal with – The family" (*SMH*, p.39). Both Lennie and Tess are mothers in crisis and, as a result, their families are in crisis too. Ted becomes a life-line to Tess: her affair with him brings her back to life. Although she knows her husband is 'a good, good man' (*SMH*, p.271), the grind of their family life has prevented Mick from making his wife "feel like this" (*SMH*, p.271). To Tess, the emotions excited by Lacey feels "like I love you" (*SMH*, p.272). Tess and her husband have not been sexually intimate for over a year because of her insistence on having a fourth child. Because of her adherence to the narrative of maternal sacrifice, Tess has pushed her family (and herself) to breaking point.

It is ironic, then, that the sentimental allure of idealised motherhood, combined with its restrictive nature in reality, can create conditions ripe for the very scenario patriarchy would wish to avoid.

Tess's character is not, by nature, adulterous. She has remained faithful throughout her marriage, dedicated herself to her family and to the care of others. Yet, given the right conditions, anyone can falter, as Lacey explains: "trouble is, you think you know someone – you could swear you knew what they were capable of – and then they go and surprise you. Human nature [...] happens all the time in this business" (*SMH*, p.125), his business being that of "family liaison". The taboos that restrict motherhood are in place to make it safe, yet, as Tess reflects on leaving the seaside town following Rosa's death, 'we moved there to be safe but, in most ways, I feel safer where we live now [...] I think maybe Lacey was right. It makes you dizzy: too much water, too much sky' (*SMH*, p.323). Motherhood, riddled with taboos, mythical ideals and restrictions cannot fail to disorientate female perspective. It can make women unpredictable, with Tess informing Mick that, "you've no idea, I tell him, whether this place is safe any more" (*SMH*, p.224).

Myerson's novel illustrates how personally mutilating society's expectations of mothers can be, how the degree of vigilance and level of care can take its toll. There is a moment of proleptic irony in the text when Tess and Lacey first become close. They are standing, symbolically, on the water's edge as Tess reflects: 'I realise I've never been here without my kids. I've never stood on the edge of this pond and not had to grab the hood of some child or other to stop it going into all that weedy water. I've never in all these years with Mick pressed my face into the neck of another man' (*SMH*, p.244). It is not surprising, then, that an affair, something different, something emotionally nourishing and

about *self*, would appeal as a way to alleviate the burden of motherhood. From having to care too much, a form of nihilism can occur as a means of release: Tess acknowledges that 'I could fuck things up and not care at all – as if there's nothing at stake. Not even the kids sometimes. It scares me' (*SMH*, p.133). In Myerson's fictional world, children don't die because they have adulterous mothers: children die because society continues to exploit and, in her terms, mutilate women.

*Something* requires a less than conventional moral reading. It could be argued that Lacey's intervention in the families of Tess and Lennie has a positive outcome, on both an actual and a symbolic level. From the outset, Alex (Lennie's husband) holds Lacey responsible for finding his murdered wife's heart. Lacey restores heart to Tess with their affair, and in so doing (through the death of Tess's daughter Rosa), to Lennie also. For Rosa represents Lennie's heart in the text, with her name evoking the rose, a flower resembling the human heart and symbolising love. The night before Lennie's funeral (as Tess lies entwined with Lacey in the beach hut), Rosa slips away unnoticed and is later found drowned. She is then, 'buried right bang next to Lennie, as close under the yew as they could manage' (*SMH*, p.326), restoring to Lennie her heart and making her complete. At the close of the novel, Tess's family has repaired itself and stays together with the more manageable three, as opposed to four, children.

Nevertheless, Myerson has achieved this ending through the death of a child. There appears, therefore, to be a moral contradiction in how Myerson regards female passion: it is a life-saver and a life-taker in equal

measure. Myerson uses desire to illustrate how much women stand to lose by becoming mothers in today's society. For Myerson, desire indicates a lust for life, an expression of self that motherhood is currently, sadly, antithetical to in real life and thence in literary representation. The narrative revolves around a sexual affair since it illustrates how motherhood has constricted Tess's life, with an adulterous romance filling what Snitow terms the 'vacuum created by social conditions' (Snitow, p.138). Tess's life is so full of children, school runs and domestic chores she has to conduct her affair with her baby present:

I feed her on the little lumpy bed next to Lacey. And the noise of her sucking loudly and happily with him right next to me feels so strange and easy that I find I can barely speak to him or look at him while it's happening. (*SMH*, p.267)

Motherhood places such restrictions on a woman's time and energy that an affair is one of the few options available to women in need of a degree of external recognition, approbation or excitement.

According to conventional judgement, the real and fictional mothers discussed in this thesis all transgress cultural norms. Kate in *How She Does It* works so hard she often does not see her children for days at a time; Eva's self-obsession prevents her from empathising with her own child; Ruth in *The Little House* cannot form an attachment to her son from the moment of his birth; Tess in *Something* and the nameless mother in *Incendiary* are having sex with men who are not their husbands at the very moment their children are dying elsewhere. These novels present the moral dilemmas of the turn-of-this-century mother and they also

express a desire to re-examine the more traditional, ethical interpretations of *good* mothering: if Tess, Margaret and Ammu, Tonie and the mother in *Incendiary* had not been having affairs; if Eva and Ruth had not been more interested in going to work than in looking after their children, their children would not have died, or lost their hearing, or have been removed from their care, or grown up to have committed mass murder.

However, the often tragic outcomes of these narratives do not, I believe, deliver a judgement on these mothers' *bad* behaviour. This selection of fiction and memoir argues, implicitly, in the mother's defence, from a moral position of commonality. These texts invite the reader to understand, to identify with these characters and sympathise with their plight. The motherhood literature from 1995-2010 is written to elicit a common understanding, which this chapter proceeds to analyse.

### **The Ethics of Commonality and The Will to Truth**

David Parker takes issue with postmodernist suspicion of ethics in literature and argues that the will to power fails to recognise the potential for commonality within ethics. To demonstrate his point he relates the gospel story of the adulterous woman in which the Pharisees are ready to stone the woman to death, as they are obligated to do by law, until they are prompted to look into their own consciences and discover that none of them is without sin: 'that is, they are encouraged to recognise an element of commonality with the adulterous woman, at which moment they transcend the self/Other binarism of their judgmental attitude' (Parker, D., p.6). Parker also includes Raimond Gaita's argument from

'Common Understanding and Individual Voices' which posits 'the ethical implications of what he calls 'the "we" of fellowship' as opposed to cultural and other classificatory forms of judgementalism' (Parker, D., p.6).<sup>19</sup>

The memoirs and novels studied in this thesis serve to inspire their readers to transcend the self/Other binarism of their judgmental impulses and identify with the mother's predicament. To this end, these writers often employ humour to engage the reader and soften the more unpalatable aspects of their depictions. Rozsika Parker observes of her patients in psychoanalysis that 'such painful truths can only be expressed through humour; it is only via irony and a light touch that ambivalence is rendered bearable' (Parker, R., p.6). Pearson's novel *How She Does It* openly proclaims itself 'a comedy about failure' on its title page. Cusk's *A Life's Work* is often witty. Many instances in these narratives elicit a camaraderie born of recognition, of shared experience. Cusk is forced to flee a café lunch with a childless friend because her baby suddenly starts 'to scream with an extraordinary primitive anguish' (*ALW*, p.56). Flustered, Cusk ends her first social engagement since the birth 'running through the park, the empty [baby] pouch flapping at my front, the roaring baby held out before me like something on fire, my friend trotting embarrassed behind' (*ALW*, p.56). I too have a similar scene etched in my memory, taking the escalator stairs in John Lewis two-at-a-time, attempting to escape the reproving glances of other customers with my screaming progeny strapped to my front. Given that the memoirs and

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<sup>19</sup> Raimond Gaita, 'Common Understanding and Individual Voices', in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, ed. by Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.269-89.

novels analysed here hope to inspire their readers to transcend the self/Other binarism of their judgmental impulses and identify with the mother's predicament, it is surprising that these writers' endeavours often generated controversy. Cusk's *A Life's Work* was indeed well received by 'mothers who, like [her], find the experience so momentous that reading about it has a strangely narcotic effect' (*ALW*, p.3). However, the book reached a wider public, and the general outcry that followed its publication, as discussed in chapter two, demonstrates how deeply ingrained the judgement of mothers remains within our culture.

Shriver's *Kevin* ostensibly poses the greatest challenge to the reader in terms of encouraging non-judgementalism through the *we of fellowship*. Aspects of Eva's behaviour (and most of Kevin's) could be regarded as unforgivable. Kevin is a remorseless spree killer and, by her own admission, Eva is a career woman who resents her son from the moment of his conception:

worst of all, before her hapless son has even managed to survive the inhospitable climate of her clenched, reluctant womb she has committed what you yourself, Franklin, deemed the officially unspeakable: she had capriciously changed her mind. (*K*, p.70)

However, Shriver creates a climate of compassion in the novel and the measure of her success can be determined by the fact that one of the most touching (as well as witty) scenes in the novel is when Eva finally snaps and physically assaults her son.

The incident occurs on a day where Kevin has tested his mother beyond endurance. Although nearly six, he refuses to be toilet trained and can defecate at will: 'Kevin ran a seat of the pants operation and, Kevin, too, had learned to form a weapon from shit' (K, p.189). Like Doris Lessing's description of Ben in *The Fifth Child* (1988), Shriver does not spare the reader from the more revolting aspects of Kevin's behaviour: 'he submitted to being changed placidly enough. He seemed to bask in the ritual and may have inferred from my growing briskness a gratifying embarrassment, for swabbing his tight little testicles when he was nearly six was beginning to feel risqué' (K, p.189). Shriver presents Kevin's behaviour through Eva's eyes hence this reader shares her frustration when Kevin soils himself for the third time in an hour. At the same time, the reader is also prompted to consider why Kevin should behave like this.

Eva loses control and hurls Kevin from the changing mat. As Kevin is left momentarily dangling in space, Eva's acerbic wit has time to observe that: 'he seemed to weigh nothing, as if that tight, dense little body stocked with such inexhaustible quantities of shit was packed instead with Styrofoam peanuts' (K, p.194). Most importantly, however, for a couple of seconds Eva allows herself to be *real* with Kevin. In allowing her behaviour to fall short of the ideal mother she shares a rare moment of recognition with her son. Displaying her suppressed feelings of maternal hatred for the first time in front of her son, Eva experiences a revelation:

real love shares more in common with hatred and rage



than it does with geniality and politeness. For two seconds I felt whole, and like Kevin Khatchadourian's real mother. I felt close to him. I felt like myself – my true, unexpurgated self – and I felt we were finally communicating. (K, p.196)

Similarly, Kevin responds to this rare moment of genuine emotion from his mother: 'he landed with a dull clang against the edge of the stainless steel changing table. His head at a quizzical tilt, as if he was finally *interested* in something' (K, p.194). Touchingly, Kevin rewards Eva's outburst of real feeling (albeit expressed as rage and brutality) by concealing her behaviour from the doctor and his father.

Interestingly, this incident appears to contradict moral arguments to un-self in motherhood. Eva only appears to be able to feel empathy for Kevin when she is truly herself in his presence, flaws and all. Her moment of revelation suggests that self and empathy are not incompatible: indeed, one is necessary to engender the other. The moral conclusions of these novels offer a judgement on society itself that has so prescribed how a mother should feel and behave: that outlaws the expressions of self within motherhood. These characters, like Cusk, find 'the culture of motherhood completely suffocating'.<sup>20</sup> Cusk believes that the new mother encounters 'the possibility of suppressing her true feelings in order to be "good" and gain approval. My own struggle had been to resist this mechanism. I wanted to – I had to – remain "myself"'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Freely, 'The Myth of Motherhood'.

<sup>21</sup> Cusk, 'I was only being honest'.

Shriver presents a difficult and complex picture of motherhood that includes 'fleeting (or not so fleeting) feelings of hatred for a child' (Parker, R., p.5). Rozsika Parker comments on the relief mothers can experience at having their worst thoughts and feelings articulated:

mothers do look to other mothers to find 'absolution' for maternal emotions which the dominant cultural representations of motherhood render unacceptable, and which mothers themselves experience as both painful and unforgivable. I refer to the fleeting (or not so fleeting) feelings of hatred for a child than can grip a mother, the moment of recoil from a much-loved body, the desire to abandon, to smash the untouched plate of food in the toddler's face, to yank a child's arm while crossing the road, scrub too hard with a face cloth, change the lock against an adolescent, or the fantasy of hurling a howling baby out of the window. (Parker, R., p.5)

Jenni Murray, presenter of BBC Radio's *Woman's Hour*, admits that:

as a mother of two, reading Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* was a comfort and a revelation. I'm not the only one who agonised over what the impact of having a child would be, felt invaded by pregnancy and was terrified at the awesome responsibility of becoming a mother and being held responsible for whatever adult I turned out.<sup>22</sup>

One review of Shriver's novel encapsulates the nature of the moral dimension of *Kevin*, 'the book yanks the reader back and forth between

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<sup>22</sup> This quotation is taken from the book jacket of the 1<sup>st</sup> UK edn (2005) of Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (New York: Counterpoint; London: Serpent's Tail, 2005).

blame and empathy, retribution and forgiveness'.<sup>23</sup> Because of the *we of fellowship* we contextualise Kevin's murders within a childhood where his mother loved her husband and his sister more than him. We understand Eva's flawed mothering of Kevin as a consequence of a cultural ideal that did not permit Eva to be herself in motherhood. Although she tried very hard to conform to the ideal – giving up work, making toys and biscuits, this type of culturally prescribed motherhood was not for her. Shriver's novel circumvents a reductive reading of Eva's mothering. She presents the question of Eva's moral responsibility in broader, more complex terms, resisting the temptation of the binary opposites of 'exoneration and excoriation' (*K*, p.83) for her protagonist. *Kevin* is a novel that is not afraid to sympathise with the mother's plight at the same time as acknowledging the damage that can be done by a mother's self interest. *Kevin* tests the reader's moral compass and is a more truthful book as a result.

### **Contemporary Fiction and the Dearth of Moral concepts in the Late Twentieth Century**

Motherhood is considered by many as primarily an ethical subject and recent motherhood fiction and memoir is inspired by a moral vision, to help other mothers understand motherhood. Yet these authors are writing following a period in literary theory when ethics in literature has been discredited as being nothing more than the will to power as opposed to the will to truth to which their texts aspire. David Parker declares that

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<sup>23</sup> This quotation is taken from the book jacket of the 1<sup>st</sup> UK edn (2005) of Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (New York: Counterpoint; London: Serpent's Tail, 2005).

'one of the permanent legacies of the political literary theory of the 1970s and 80s [such as that which arose from third wave feminism] has been precisely to keep reminding us of the historically and culturally contingent basis of formations like ethics and the so-called literary canon' (Parker, D., p.5). Haines in 'Deepening the Self' asserts that this turn from the ethical has been the result of the moral enquiry of the last century having confined itself to addressing a different type of question entirely: that of 'what kind of thing is a moral judgement?' (Haines, p.22).

David Parker refers to Annette Baier's chapter in *Renegotiating Ethics*, 'Ethics in Many Different Voices' as having perhaps 'gone further than others in recognising the need for explicit debate over such central questions in moral philosophy as the role of traditions, essences, and universals' (Parker, D., p. 4).<sup>24</sup> Most often, such work has led to an exposé of ethics in literature, like Susan Moller Okin's 'Whose Traditions? Which Understandings?'. Her essay argues that the very moral tales Alasdair MacIntyre portrays as central in an education in the virtues contain gender stereotypes that are the 'basic building blocks of male domination' (Parker, D., p.16).<sup>25</sup> So, despite the traditional presumptions about literature and the ethical, and Parker's earlier assertions of the long tradition of spiritual and moral discrimination mediated by literature, he acknowledges in his introduction to *Renegotiating Ethics* that there has been 'the perception that in "advanced" literary circles for most of the 1970s and 1980s, few topics could have been more uninteresting, more

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<sup>24</sup> Annette C. Baier, 'Ethics in Many Different Voices', in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, ed. by Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.247-68.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p.45.

depassé, less likely to attract budding young theorists, than the topic 'Ethics and Literature' (Parker, D., p.1). The 'strange absence of the ethical in literary theory' forms part of the inspiration for Nussbaum's 'Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature' (Parker, D., p.2). Nussbaum argues that during this period, literary theory has failed to address 'the organising questions of moral philosophy' and specifically 'the question of how we should live' (Parker, D., p.2).

David Parker maintains that the literary theory preceding the late twentieth century had focussed on 'areas such as epistemology, semantics and ontology and, for the most part inadvertently, has undermined the very ground our notion of the ethical once stood upon' (Parker, D., p.6). To demonstrate, Parker cites this passage from Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*:

morality is a version of the same language aporia that gave rise to such concepts as 'man' or 'love' or 'self', and [is] not the cause and consequence of such. The passage to an ethical tonality does not result from a transcendental imperative but is the referential (and therefore unreliable) version of a linguistic confusion.

Ethics ... is a discursive mode among others. (Parker, D., p.9)<sup>26</sup>

De Man is thus proposing that subjectivity, what it is to be *human* (inclusive of the notion of moral intuition) is an effect of language, rather than an effect of self, and his rejection of the concept of 'a transcendental imperative' can be seen to be aligned with Foucault's ideas on the subject. Foucault denied the existence of a pre-existent *self*. Foucault

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<sup>26</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

perceives *man* as an empty vessel that we 'just fill up' with the stories we tell ourselves (White, p.110).

Foucault's analyses of Greek and Roman ethics are of a piece with his attacks elsewhere upon the illusions of humanism. At the base of these attacks is his refusal to credit the idea of a human subject. The idea that there resides within the individual a subjectivity - an essential self - that it is the duty of the individual to cultivate, at the expense of the pleasures available for enjoyment, is for Foucault the error shared by Christianity, Classical humanism, and the modern human sciences alike. (White, p.138)<sup>27</sup>

The denial of a pre-extant self, combined with the suspicion that ethics itself may be just another discourse, has contributed to literature's suffering from a dearth of critical tools (such as moral concepts and language) with which to investigate ethical subjects like the mother. It is ironic then that certain postmodernist ideas have been so successful in giving the 'Other' a voice but have left her little of moral *value* and *meaning* to say.

By giving voice to 'the Other', certain postmodernist ideas dovetailing with feminism, have helped to articulate the problems that mothers and their children face living in a world that is not set up to meet their needs: as demonstrated by the fiction and memoir included in this thesis. Wayne Booth argues in *The Company We Keep* that it is hard to argue that a concern with such evils as 'subordination and domination' is

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<sup>27</sup> By contrast, Tobin Siebers points to the ethics implicit in post-structuralist theory and criticism. He argues that, 'whether we assert a theory of the self or deny it, we remain within the sphere of ethics'. Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p.5.

not 'at least implicitly oriented towards a conception of a good life centring around goods such as freedom, self-expression, and self-realisation' (Parker, D., p.3).<sup>28</sup> And in practice, some of the more radical forms of feminism (particularly the second-wave essentialists) have

developed a picture of human flourishing not simply in terms of 'thin' concepts such as social justice and equality but also drawing on 'thicker' conceptions of human character which tend to revalue such goods as connectedness, emotional responsiveness, and care as alternatives to an allegedly masculinist concern with moral autonomy, rationality, and obligation. (Parker, D., p.4)

Yet feminism also has the power to further impoverish motherhood. The politicisation of pregnancy, childbirth and rearing has obviously affected our understanding of the meaning (and pleasures) of motherhood. Eva in *Kevin* is well-versed in the rhetoric of feminist discourse and she struggles to appreciate the potential rewards of the experience. She admits that, even prior to Kevin's conception, she only had reservations about motherhood. Her list of reasons why not to become a mother includes the following:

- unnatural altruism: being forced to make decisions in accordance with what is best for somebody else. (I'm a pig.);

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<sup>28</sup> Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) p.5.

- curtailment of my travelling. (Note curtailment. Not conclusion.);
- dementing boredom. (I found small children brutally dull. I did, even from the outset, admit this to myself.);
- worthless social life. (I had never had a decent conversation with a friend's five year old in the room.);
- social demotion. (I was a respected entrepreneur. Once I had a toddler in tow, every man I knew – every woman, too, which is depressing – would take me less seriously). (K, p.26)<sup>29</sup>

Feminist discourse appears to have had a flattening effect on Eva's understanding of motherhood. She is so concerned with not succumbing to a type of *faux homage* to motherhood, described by Ann Douglas as the 'flattery American women were trained to demand in place of justice and equality', that Eva misses out on deriving any pleasure at all from her son Kevin.<sup>30</sup> In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum characterises 'social theorising' (such as feminism) as demonstrating a 'spirit of knowingness': a spirit, she contends, which recognises the existence of phenomena not yet satisfactorily explained or dealt with, but which is reductive in its idea of our relation to the world' (Nussbaum, p.23). Nussbaum asserts that novels are an antidote to the reductive qualities of social reasoning,

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<sup>29</sup> Bywater shares a similarly negative view of motherhood, speculating how an advertisement would run if the newborn baby had to employ his own mother: 'emotionally labile, speechless, unsocialised dwarf seeks unpaid carer. Lifetime commitment sought'. Bywater concludes this humorous flight of fancy with, 'well, you wouldn't reply, would you?' (SM, p.194).

<sup>30</sup> Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), p.75.



arguing that they are uniquely placed to acknowledge 'the mystery in human lives' and 'that there is far more to things, to life, than what we know or understand' (Nussbaum, p.20). Shriver uses Eva's sterile and ultimately tragic experience of motherhood to demonstrate how much depth and breadth of human understanding the twenty-first century has lost. Eva cannot bring herself to like, let alone love, her firstborn son, Kevin.

An unfortunate consequence of the battle for equality is to have left mothers unprepared for and confused by the ethical demands of mothering, not only in terms of 'doing the right thing' but also with regard to the finer qualities of living a good life: the values concerned with meaning, goodness, empathy and love. Awareness of injustice has the potential to turn mother against father, and to turn the child into a 'rival consciousness' (*ALW*, p.133). A feminist understanding of motherhood dominates the recent representations of motherhood discussed in this thesis as these texts ask the mother's question, 'what about me?' and tackle similar themes, depicting the mother's difficulties in attempting to integrate her former life with that of caring for a child.

It is noticeable that fathers and children are in the most part conspicuous by their absence in real terms in these texts. Fathers are either portrayed as sexist pigs (like Dorrie's husband in 'Hey Yeah' or Patrick in *The Little House*) or as an incompetent man-child (Kate's husband in *How She Does It*). Fathers and children could be regarded as responsible for the mother's oppression (a situation they are equally as powerless to change). At best, the inequity of the situation for the

majority of the mother characters considered here breeds a form of resentment as the father returns 'hale and hearty from the outside world', whilst the mother is left 'at the end of her rope' (*HY*, p.54). This focus has been at the expense of rendering a richer, more rounded description of the growing relationship between mother and baby: in all its intimacy, complexity and depth. What is noticeable is the absence of portraits of this new relationship: the beginnings of recognition, separateness and empathy are rarely explored. Currently, the infant's particularity appears to be of less interest than that of the mother.<sup>31</sup>

David Parker observes that

the powerful temptation in us to divide the world self-righteously into simple binaries, is a possibility within any belief system that is oriented towards some conception of the good, be it religious, ethical, or political. Pharisaism is as much a temptation of [...] feminism as it is of any theological creed or moral commitment [...] What begins as a just project for the proper political recognition of difference can easily tip over into a zealous intolerance of it. (Parker, D., pp.6-7)

The absence of well-rounded depictions of fathers and children in these texts reflects how, confronted by the inequities in society, and fuelled by

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<sup>31</sup> Perhaps a contributory factor for the under-explored mother-child relationship in contemporary texts is the idea that, as Winnicott theorised, 'the baby exists only on the part of the mother. While the baby has no personality, no independent existence, what is there to love?' (*ALW*, p.77). Cusk appears to concur with Winnicott's contention observing that 'everywhere in the culture of maternity one can see the difficult precedence of motherly emotion, its one-sidedness, the lonely fantasy of its frilly basinets' (*ALW*, p.77). Liffey, in *Puffball*, also ponders along these lines: 'a child may very well seem unreal to the mother. Something dreamed up, clothed in flesh and blood' (*P*, p.99).

the political arguments of feminism, mothers are confused about how they should regard their nearest and dearest: friend or foe. All these texts acknowledge that society is at fault, yet the political is personal and is enacted in the arena of the family. This tension cannot help but impoverish our closest relationships.

With feminist and postmodernist ideas having contributed to the creative environment of the late twentieth century, how can contemporary writers re-articulate the truth or moral value of motherhood? Simpson describes what she feels contemporary authors are attempting to articulate through their representations of motherhood: 'it's not not wonderful, but it's more complex than that, and richer' (Crewe, p.24). These authors wish to debunk 'the stupid culture of motherhood that doesn't legislate for complexity and doesn't allow you to express yourself'.<sup>32</sup> They wish to depict the complexity of motherhood, one that is resonant with 'thick' moral concepts. This endeavour is, however, extremely difficult as the psychological, political and gender-oriented methodologies that have dominated literary criticism from the 1970s onwards have created a generation of writers who are very good at identifying what is wrong with motherhood, but less well equipped at being able to depict what is right: Simpson's double negative is telling: the best she can muster on motherhood's pleasures is that 'its not that its not, not wonderful' (Crewe, p.24). Similarly, Kate in *How She Does It* can only articulate motherhood's pleasures in oblique terms. When discussing having children with a young, childless colleague, she wonders whether

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<sup>32</sup> Freely, 'The Myth of Motherhood'.

if I'd known at her age what I know now, would I ever have had children? I close my eyes and try to imagine a world without Emily and Ben: like a world without music and lightning. (*HSD*, p.34)

The pleasures of motherhood, although acknowledged, appear difficult to describe as are Kate's relationships with her children, descriptions of who are largely absent. Kate describes the experience of motherhood as akin to the singing of lullabies, 'something to be done instinctively in the dark, although its purpose feels magically clear' (*HSD*, p.79). She lacks the language to express its pleasures fully, opting instead to evoke a mysterious, essential knowledge to indicate its importance in ethical terms.

These writers are well-equipped to express, as Rozsika Parker observed, 'bitterness, telling it like it is' (Parker, R., p.xiii), but with regard to the wonderful aspects of motherhood they are working in a cultural and literary environment of comparatively arid soil. The main thrust of these texts is the 'ideological demystification' of motherhood (Parker, R., p.7). The moral language and terms that used to describe motherhood, that used to be soaked in moral value like, 'love, story, content, faith' (*K*, p.27) have been reduced to being capable of being recovered on a purely scientific, linguistic level. Meaning has been lost from language and a new life becomes, for Eva, 'a baby is a baby' (*K*, p.221).

## Taking God out of Man

Furthermore, the increasingly secular nature of western culture also presents a challenge to traditional perceptions of morality, as demonstrated by Kate's frustration with Bellini's Madonna in *How She Does It*. Haines cites G.E.M. Anscombe's contention that 'when we speak of "obligation" and "duty" or of what is "morally" right or wrong, or of a "moral" sense of "ought", [Anscombe believes] we are relying on an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives [...] a divine law conception, which only made sense within the now-collapsed Judeo-Christian framework' (Haines, p.23).<sup>33</sup>

As discussed in chapter two, Shriver explores a postmodern society and the horror of life lived without meaning in *Kevin*. Eva describes being human as follows: 'all we do is eat and shit and rut' (*K*, p.148). Caring for a child only confirms her suspicions of the ultimate meaninglessness of life, with motherhood dragging her 'down to what we generally think of as the lower matters: eating and shitting' (*K*, p.117). For Eva, the truth is that there is no 'ambiguous emotional universe [...] await[ing] [her] on the other side of childbirth' (*K*, p.147). Eva's faith in the moral words and concepts that would help her to embrace the experience of motherhood has been eroded. She simply doesn't *get it*. She feels betrayed at Kevin's birth 'scrabbling around in myself for this new *indescribable* emotion' (*K*, p.81). With the sentimental accounts of birth failing to hold up to scrutiny, in her disappointment she misses the

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<sup>33</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy*, 33.124 (January, 1958).

true significance and value of Kevin. Her first experience of motherhood is one of 'boredom' (*K*, p.82).

*Kevin* demonstrates a distrust of moral concepts and words and illustrates how this distrust has contributed to the 'antiseptic wasteland' (*K*, p.132) that is Shriver's vision of the twenty-first century. Kevin as a character is a demonstration of what can happen if we face 'the void' (*K*, p.138). Eva describes her son thus, 'I never met anyone [...] who found his existence more of a burden or an indignity' (*K*, p.57). For Kevin's life lacks both meaning and value. Through Kevin's eyes 'the whole world looked like Africa, people milling and scrounging and squatting and laying down to die' (*K*, p.117). However, Shriver's *Kevin*, although an exploration of our 'spiritually ravenous' times, is written from an ethical perspective. The novel is in part a lament for ethics and almost in desperation, one feels, Shriver imposes a moral order on the text by giving the novel closure with Eva conceding, 'I love my son' (*K*, p.400).

Without religion or a sentimental descriptive framework of motherhood to confer meaning, some writers turn to other aspects of life that are traditionally imbued with meaning to help to establish motherhood's moral value: to 'beef up' their own depiction, as it were, by association. There is a sense in some contemporary texts of trying to find something meaningful on which to hook motherhood. Waitt's 'In the Stars' in *Gas and Air* evokes an alternative belief system that pre-dates the Judeo-Christian framework: that of the benevolence of nature and natural law. The twenty-first century has witnessed a discernible turn back toward the natural world for our understanding of life's mysteries.

Waitt's moral order is informed by the natural world that she believes embraces and protects her. As the title foretells, Waitt believes that the accidental conception of her son whilst touring Australia was nevertheless *meant to be*. She contends that forces greater than her own self were at work:

at the last minute we turned and followed the signs and I was suddenly overcome with a sense of having arrived, not home, but somewhere we were meant to be. I remember the feel of the stone, the 300-million-year-old pink granite, how special it seemed. Good, or maybe just benign. Somehow wise [...] and overriding all of these things was the sense of rightness at being in this place. Then, while the children slept above and the rain pelted around us, our baby was conceived. (GA, p.265)

Waitt enriches her sense of self, her importance in, and to, the universe, with her interpretation of this unplanned pregnancy. Her notion imbues the natural world with a meaning and an order:

looking up, all I can see is the vast expanse of stars, the rich, thick Milky Way smeared across the evening sky. I wonder about the stars, if this baby is written up there somewhere, in a language I can't read. (GA, p. 264)

Waitt's romanticised account emphasises her connectedness to a living, determining universe, where her family has significance and therefore, a security in that significance. She reminds us of the world's history and stability, with her references to 'the 300-million-year-old pink granite', and attributes to the rock moral qualities, describing it in terms of its

specialness and rightness. The rock is 'good, or maybe just benign' (GA, p.265). A more cynical reading could dismiss the conception of baby Harry as a quick fumble in the back of a camper van with an unplanned outcome, but Waitt's text confers spiritual meaning on the random conception of her child.

### **Conferring Meaning by Association**

The writers in the anthology *Gas and Air* attempt morally to enrich their depictions of motherhood by associating childbirth with big, emotionally resonant themes, such as the sinking of the Kursk submarine. Thus, parallels are drawn throughout the narrative of Eva Sallis's 'The "Kursk"' between the trapped sailors and the unborn child, with the Russians 'preparing for a laborious extraction. They have to succeed. My throat hurts, my muscles tighten and the baby inside me rolls and pitches'.<sup>34</sup> The eventual birth of her son, following a prolonged and difficult labour, is lent more emotional weight by its relationship with the Kursk:

tears on faces at Murmansk Harbour. Ungloved hands throw flowers into a calm green sea. And beside me, the pristine, angelic baby sleeps off his long journey [...] they will never see their sons again. I can't stop crying, looking down at mine. (GA, p.118)<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Eva Sallis, 'The "Kursk"', in *Gas and Air: Tales of Pregnancy, Birth and Beyond*, ed. by Jill Dawson and Margo Daly (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), pp.114-134, (p.115).

<sup>35</sup> The Russian submarine the Kursk sank with all hands in the Barents Sea (12 August 2000) 'Kursk's Final Hours' <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/890712.stm>> [accessed 26 April 2011]



This story, along with Perkins 'Little Hearts', Peter Carey's autobiographical 'A Letter To Our Son' (in which his pregnant wife is suspected of having cancer);<sup>36</sup> Lazaroo's 'The True body' (in which the central character gives birth after visiting her dying former nursemaid); Kathryn Heyman's 'Looking for Sylvia'<sup>37</sup> (in which the new mother gives birth whilst searching for her husband's mother's grave) *show* us by association that birth is a serious subject, full of meaning, rather than attempt to *describe* the meaning of birth in words, thus neatly side-stepping possible charges of sentimental language.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of birth and death is a common device in the stories in *Gas and Air*. 'A Letter to Our Son', 'The True Body', 'The Kursk', 'Looking for Sylvia' and 'Living Death: An Online Elegy' all discuss birth and death in parallel. Rozsika Parker interestingly observes that 'Western industrial cultures offer very few meaningful rituals, falling back on a questionable medicalisation of life and death' (Parker, R., p.12), an assertion which adds weight to concerns over the late twentieth-century's ethical impoverishment. On a more obvious level, however, birth serves as a reminder of our mortality. Child birth has traditionally been perceived as an investment in the future, our only riposte to death. Some of these stories still use associations with death to recall this more traditional, moral association. They perceive the forthcoming child as symbolising hope against all the odds, and are thus about refuting the irrefutable. Thus in Heyman's short story 'Looking for Sylvia' the

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Carey, 'A Letter to Our Son', in *GA*, pp.36-56.

<sup>37</sup> Kathryn Heyman, 'Looking for Sylvia', in *GA*, pp.203-13.

protagonist's pregnancy gives her cause to reflect on her husband's mother's untimely demise:

I remember Martin, all motherless and alone. I sit on the closed toilet seat, put my hand on my bump and whisper, 'I will always protect you. I will I promise'. Even as I say it I am filled with fear, thinking of Martin's mother, the mother who could not protect him. (GA, p.204)

However, the birth of her own baby, in a graveyard beside her husband's mother's grave, sweeps away all her uncertainties:

I put my arms down for the warm, wet length of the baby and its OK, I know it's OK, I don't even have to promise. I am not going to die, not me. I am never going to die. (GA, p.213)

The story suggests that birth, with its blatant life affirming message, has restored her belief in a *logic* or *sense* to things. This awareness is part of the morality of being human. To know we are going to die, and that our children are going to die, but that we must live with hope, with love and with gratitude.

Birth has traditionally restored our belief in a *logic* or *sense* to things, in life's mysteries. However, Heyman's 'Looking for Sylvia' and Waitt's 'In the Stars' are in the minority in this respect. For the majority of contemporary writers considered here birth is now failing to deliver. A potential reason for this is the impact of scientific advances in pregnancy and childbirth. Scientific advances have enabled us to study life at a cellular level. Whilst providing unparalleled access to previously only

imagined aspects of life, these insights have, curiously, removed an element of mystery. For, as science has extended its reach into space and deep into our physical being, arguably our soul has been displaced, for science has proved that God is not in the Heavens and our soul does not reside deep within us. As the character of Eva observes, our understanding of human life has become a question of bio-chemistry, stripped down to a 'collection of cells and electrical impulses [...] it is material, which is why *materials are everything*' (K, p.138). The majority of writers considered here suggest that a predominantly scientific view of the world, which engenders a scientific approach to birth and to the language surrounding birth, impoverishes the birth experience.

### **The Scientification of Love**

Recent representations of pregnancy and birth have been affected by scientific advances. Scientific discourse subtly changes the meaning of motherhood: it becomes less of a spiritual exercise and more of a process. Heyman's and Waitt's positive experience of birth differ from the majority of accounts considered here because they are depicting births that take place outside of the medical establishment. Medical intervention begins early in pregnancy, and has the potential to interfere with the mother's imagining and bonding with her unborn child. Not only do mothers now have an interior view of the baby (as Perkins, in 'Little Hearts' documents, 'we had had a scan a month earlier, the twenty week scan' [GA, p.9]): we now routinely approach pregnancy and birth from a scientific point of view. Writers are at ease with medical terminology: it

replaces more value-based words in their descriptions. The unborn child is now a 'foetus', with its progress charted not by its mother's growing size or its miraculous first movements within her, but by whether or not it has passed the check for Downs Syndrome or Spina Bifida. For today's expectant mother, Perkins observes, 'the scientists' (GA, p.15) have taken the place of female relatives and the community midwife, in terms of translating her experience of pregnancy and birth for her, and in 'A Letter to Our Son' Carey observes 'we had read so many books about babies, been to classes where we learned about how babies are born' (GA, p.46). Therefore, stories of childbirth arising from the late twentieth century provide first and foremost a medical account of birth, broken down into first and second stages of labour or by how many centimetres the cervix has dilated at a given point in the narrative. 'I've read all the books, I know the terms [...] Gestation and Dilation and Immunisation' (GA, p.206). Writers of memoir in particular are hungry to document their own accounts of birth. They relish the details of when the waters broke, the progress of the cervix dilating, the procedures used. However, with medicalisation birth has become a standardised process. Therefore, one account reads much the same as another. What strikes one most about an anthology like *Gas and Air* is how banal the depictions of birth are; how these accounts fail to engage with the 'new *indescribable* emotion' Eva in *Kevin* eagerly anticipates from bringing new life into the world (K, p.81).

*Gas and Air* therefore exhibits an uncomfortable tension in the attempt to depict the uniqueness of birth from within what has become a

standardised medical process. Indeed, in Bryan's story, 'Deliverance', the description of birth even slips into the third person, despite being narrated by the mother: 'this was hyper-real, like the movies or the books. Breathe, says the husband, breathe. The woman moans, the machine bleeps, and the nurses do efficient things with obscure looking equipment' (GA, p.70). The experience of medicalised birth has become so uniform, that depictions are often thus narrated from outside of the main participants' experience, almost voyeuristically. Such 'once-removed' contemporary depictions of childbirth are therefore strangely lacking in emotional content and energy. Giving birth is portrayed in bland, objective terms, without passion and humanity.

In 'Deliverance' (indeed in *Gas and Air* generally), fiction and memoir is reduced to describing birth in terms of a medicalised event and is therefore haunted by a sense of exclusion, powerlessness and shock. The feeling of detachment is sometimes part drug-related, as in Jerome's 'Gwendolyn':

under the quiet bright lights of the operating theatre [...] they put up a small screen in front of [my] face, and now the spinal injection had separated [my] body from [me]. I am only my head, only my breasts and my heart and my brain. (GA, p.169).

However, Eva in *Kevin*, does muster an emotional response to the birth of her son, one of rage:

I despised being spread out like some farm exhibit with strangers gawping between my canted knees. I detested

Dr Rhinestein's pointed rat-like little face and her brisk, censorious manner. I hated myself for ever having agreed to this humiliating theatre. (K, p.75)

Both representations are equally devoid of rich emotional content.

As noted in chapter two, there is often a feminist discourse fuelling this sense of outrage. In 'Deliverance':

The bed in the labour ward was the exact height, width and firmness of an ironing board. They balanced me on the top with a continuous fetal monitor strapped across my stomach, a blood pressure monitor on my arm and injunctions not to move. The machines were sensitive: undue movements could confuse the readings. Hospital midwives came, serious-faced, abrupt women who seemed to prefer not to meet my eye. They prodded my ankles, hands and face for Oedema, examined me internally, took blood tests. A third doctor came. He managed to insert an intravenous valve into the back of my hand whilst completely ignoring me. (GA, p.67)

The expectant parents are bemused by being excluded from what the birth *means* for them. They are onlookers at the birth of their own child because they cannot enter the inner sanctum of the medical elite. Therefore, curiously, these stories lack any sense of urgency, agency or participation, for the medicalisation of birth forces parents to become disempowered spectators. Unexpectedly, intelligent, sensitive and engaged human beings find themselves relegated to the bench in one of the most significant moments of their lives.

Most writers in *Gas and Air* convey a similar sense of having been cheated, wrong-footed by the birth experience. In 'A Letter to Our Son' Carey documents his disappointment:

in the classes they tell you that the contractions will start far apart [...] during this period the mother could expect to walk around, to listen to music, to enjoy a massage. However, your birth was not to be like this. This was not because of you. It was because of the Oxytocin. (GA, p.51)

Carey comments on his lack of emotional connection at the birth: 'what did I think during the labour? I thought: when this contraction is over I will get to that Evian bottle' (GA, p. 53). Occasionally, these accounts become little more than a description of the brutality of birth, of blood and guts. Thus, in Dawson's 'The Twilight Zone',

we glanced around the birthing room as we left and were stunned into silence by the devastation we'd managed to wreak: blood splattered cloths, towels, sheets, paper and hospital gowns strewn everywhere. Like the scene of a violent attack. (GA, p.90)

Sometimes, in an attempt to depict the stripping away of humanity during the delivery process, the depictions are simply vulgar, as in 'Deliverance': 'I was crouched over a bedpan, pissing like a horse' (GA, p.69).

Mostly, one is struck by the mundane nature of these depictions. However, these stories also yearn for the promised intimacy and control of the imagined birth, the birth these parents had envisaged. In 'Pearl', Darling expresses her outrage at being denied, 'this was not the labour I

had planned. I won't let them treat me this way, I thought angrily. I'll discharge myself, go home and phone Margaret, give birth in the bath' (GA, p.67). There is a palpable sense of disappointment at having missed something important, something ethical in the experience. Depictions of medicalised birth rarely offer a picture of human flourishing. Hence God is often missed in these circumstances; as Carey observes, 'I wished there was a God I could pray to' (GA, p.39).

Carey depicts a reliance on homeopathic activities during the birth, indicating an attempt to gain access to a more meaningful experience:

you wouldn't believe the things we had. We had a cassette player and a tape with soothing music. We had rosemary and lavender oil so I could massage your mother and relax her between contractions. I had a thermos to fill with blocks of frozen orange juice. There were special cold packs to relieve the pain of a backache labour. (GA, p.47)

To cite another example from many, in Perkin's 'Little Hearts' 'Paula is burning an orange candle and her tape plays seagulls and crashing wave sounds' (GA, p.12). These activities hope to unlock the birth experience, to, (in this instance), access a womanhood that 'Gauguin might have painted. Strong and dark, she looks like a woman who could squat down in a field, have her baby, and continue on her way' (GA, p.28). Although this representation can be discredited as an essentialist portrayal of childbirth, it cannot be disputed that this is a more empowering image of birth than the burning of candles, the straddling of a birthing ball under stark strip hospital lighting or listening to the traditional music of another



culture. These are, at best, displacement activities during an experience from which these writers and characters feel mostly excluded.

With birth marking the start of the mothering experience and hospital-delivery the norm for the majority of women, these memoirs and fictional accounts suggest potential psychological repercussions for both mother and child. Gregory's *The Little House* demonstrates how a medicalised birth is antithetical to a good birth experience and can interrupt mother and child bonding, and stall the generation of love and morality. Following an emergency caesarean section, Ruth's first moments with her son are marked by a sense of sorrow, confusion and guilt.

It was pointless to explain the sense of strangeness and alienation. But she felt as if the little suit had been bought for another baby, not this one. The little suit had been bought for the baby that she had felt inside her, that had walked with her, and slept with her, and been with her for nine long months. It was for the imaginary baby, who had an imaginary birth, where Ruth had breathed away all the pains, where Patrick had massaged her back and held her hand and talked to her engagingly and charmingly through the hours of her labour, and where, after he had been triumphantly born, everyone had praised her for doing so well. (*LH*, p.72)

This was not the birth she had imagined, so this could not be her baby. The Health visitor observes that 'Mother and Child did not seem to have bonded, and that Mother seemed depressed' (*LH*, p.81). Their relationship takes months to repair, with Ruth admitting that, "sometimes

I'm not sure if I love him at all" she said very quietly. "I don't enjoy being with him"" (*LH*, p.122). Ruth's delivery has obscured the meaning of her child for her. Representations of medicalised birth are consistent in the portrayal of the medical profession taking those first moments with the child away from the mother: and *The Little House* depicts the lasting damage this can cause.

### Depictions of Home Birth

The depiction of a homebirth in McEwan's novel *The Child in Time* is rich with moral concepts and words, yet I have had to go outside the focal period of this study to find such an example. The potential for a home delivery to provide a more value-orientated experience is hard to investigate within the parameters of this thesis, for home birth (and tacitly, unmedicalised birth) is discouraged in modern, Western society, with only three per cent of UK births taking place outside hospital.<sup>38</sup> However, the rare portraits of home birth that do exist in representation also tend to be problematic, as they are more susceptible to charges of essentialism or at least romanticism.

The setting for the home birth in McEwan's novel is romantic and improbable, but at the same time offers a portrait of birth with far more emotional resonance. Crucially, the birth scene is the novel's climax and conclusion. The husband is reunited with his estranged wife at the very moment she is going to give birth to their second child, a pregnancy of

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<sup>38</sup> In the 1960s, one in three women in the UK gave birth at home. Now the figure is less than 3%. Joanna Kavenna, 'Home Births: A Womb of my Own', *Observer*, 30 January 2011, Life and Style section <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/30/home-births-womb-of-my-own>> [accessed 6 February 2011]

which he has been unaware until this moment. The birth takes place on a snowy night, in a lonely cottage hidden in the midst of a forest. The setting belongs to a bygone era and the husband is therefore engaged in activities associated with a more authentic way of life; stoking the fires, preparing water bottles and making jasmine tea. There are no stark lights here, just fire-light, cotton sheets and the intimacy of the parents' relationship. The return to a more primitive time, with the mother exerting her 'absolute right to order her own domain' (McEwan, p.216) has overtones of essentialism (and of Anna's birth in Lawrence's *The Rainbow*). Yet this degree of contrivance (as with Waitt's 'In the Stars') is necessary to enable the reader to believe that birth could happen this way in the late twentieth century. There are no doctors, medical equipment, procedures or terminology: there is, however, a sense of freedom, control, involvement and ultimately, meaning for both parents. The moral value of such a birth is palpable.

From the point of view of the narrative, this scene must deliver a reconciliation of the parents and their acceptance of their first daughter's loss. Therefore this scene would not work within the confines of a hospital because the lack of privacy would exclude intimacy between the couple. In the isolated cottage, there is no doctor or midwife to order or intrude in events: there is just a woman, 'back in control' (McEwan, p.216) between contractions; and the man, *helping* his wife to deliver their child. When the child's head unexpectedly appears ('a presence, a revelation'), and the midwife has still not arrived, the fact that 'it was suddenly and obviously there, a person not from another town or another country but

from life itself, the simplicity of that, was communicating to him a clarity and a purpose' (McEwan, p.219). As the only person available, the husband is empowered by the situation and acquires the confidence to clear the newborn's mouth of mucus and loosen the cord from around the child's neck, enabling it to be born safely.

The passage has a beauty, an engagement and an agency that would be unconvincing had McEwan followed modern-day standard birthing practice. In this situation, Julie is able to give birth and her husband sees 'in an instant how active and generous the verb was – she summoned her will and her physical strength and gave' (McEwan, p.219). What is striking is that the language of this description differs from the majority of the other examples of hospital deliveries discussed here. McEwan's language uses words soaked in moral value like human dignity, fragility, generosity and hope. This depiction of birth is not deadened through shock, fear or rage. The characters aren't left asking themselves how to respond to the new arrival. Instead, these parents simply draw the bed covers over their baby and 'Stephen climbed into bed beside Julie and they kept the baby warm between them' (McEwan, p. 220). It is a vibrant and loving representation of birth, a celebration of 'life loving itself' (McEwan, p.220). It is an ethical portrait, reflecting on what it means to be human. Yet, to a degree, this element of moral resonance is achieved by a return to an earlier sentimental, Lawrentian, depiction of birth.

## The Impoverishment of Language

The writers discussed in this thesis commonly describe birth using disengaged, scientific language. Haines, amongst other moral philosophers, contends that from the Enlightenment onwards, we have been 'guilty of separating language into a scientific and an unscientific component: a clean, perfectly formed part which precisely describes the world of 'sense' and 'reason'; and a messy, shapeless part' (Haines, p.26), no longer derived from God or any transcendental understanding of selfhood. This dilemma can be clearly identified in more recent accounts of birth. Writers' attempts at engagement with the 'great mysteries' of life and death and the moral universe now seem unconvincing and sentimental, as in the case of 'In the Stars' in *Gas and Air*. Both writer and reader have grown to mistrust language. Carey highlights this difficulty in 'A Letter to Our Son', commenting that the term 'little' 'is so loaded that writers are wary of using it. It is cute, sentimental, "easy" [...] and yet we were not aware of the torrents of emotion your "littleness" would unleash in us, and by the end of September the thirteenth we would think it was nothing other than the meaning of life itself' (GA, p.48). The shift in tone from the scientific, linguistic analysis of the word 'little' to the 'messy, shapeless' hyperbolic claim to have 'discovered the meaning of life itself' somehow undermines itself. Has literature (an activity inclusive of both writer and reader) lost its ability to distinguish between sentiment and sentimentality? Haines contends that the division of language between the scientific and a 'messy, shapeless' part has an obvious conceptual impact:

not only the vast array of moral terms we actually live by (shame, courage, modesty, arrogance, sentimentality, confidence, rudeness, dishonesty, integrity, brutality, honour, etc.) but also the small number of supposed master concepts like 'good' and 'right' have been obscured as much by the Enlightenment's blinkered philosophies of mind and language as by its historical myopia. (Haines, p.25)

Haines argues this conceptual impoverishment has left us in 'a dilemma over where to put concepts like "will" and "desire": in the clean, no-questions-asked scientific part ("I just *want* to"), or in the messy imponderable unscientific part ("I don't know *what* I want")?' (Haines, p.26). His condemnation is unequivocal, asserting that, 'some kinds of thought can actually destroy forms of life' (Haines, p.25). Shriver's *Kevin* is an obvious illustration of this possibility, with Kevin becoming a murderer because he can only express "I just want to". Kevin cannot articulate the emotional vulnerability expressed by "I don't know what I want"; or worse still, "I just want my mummy to notice me": he expresses his feelings through his actions.

Haines observes that moral philosophers such as Bernard Williams, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, Annette Baier, Martha Nussbaum and Raimond Gaita have identified the modern moral philosophy of the 1990s to be, 'partly grounded in an impoverished and blinkered philosophy of language, this century's inheritor of a correspondingly inadequate Enlightenment philosophy of mind' (Haines, p.22). In 'Vision and Choice in Morality', Iris

Murdoch takes issue with the Enlightenment's approach to language in particular, claiming that: 'what the linguistic analysts mistrust is precisely language'. Murdoch does not ask them to abandon 'the linguistic method', however, but to take it 'seriously': that is, to 'extend the limits of the language' rather as poets do, enabling it 'to illuminate regions of reality which were formerly dark'.<sup>39</sup>

Writers of motherhood from the late twentieth century onwards appear, like Carey, conscious of an inadequacy in narrativised language. Some, like Dawson in 'The Twilight Zone', turn to poetry in their texts to open up these dark 'regions of reality'. Dawson recalls Plath on hearing her baby's first cries, 'a bald cry, Sylvia Plath called it, clear vowels, rising like balloons to the ceiling' and Dawson reflects 'how clever poetry is, to wait in the wings like that for fifteen years, just until you need it' (GA, p. 87). Yet ultimately, Dawson finds even poetry wanting in the expression of mother-child bonding: '*Love set you going, like a fat gold watch.* Sometimes even poetry lets you down. I don't know, I don't know, no one knows. That's more like it' (GA, p.120). To cite Shelley, do we now lack 'the creative faculty to imagine that which we know?' (Haines, p.38).<sup>40</sup>

Finding even poetry a disappointment, Dawson employs magic realism to directly address the problem of an impoverished moral language. In this story, the newborn baby Finn can talk and provides a

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<sup>39</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (1956), in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. by Peter Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 76-98 (p.83-4 & 90), cited by Haines (p.26).

<sup>40</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821), in *The Four Ages of Poetry*, ed. by H.F.B. Brett-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p.52.

running commentary on the trite body of words and expressions available when describing birth and the newly delivered. His father Simon arrives at the bedside with the usual platitudes, “‘he’s gorgeous” [...] Finn opens one eye. The other is crusted with sleep. “How predictable you are,” Finn says’ (GA, p.91). The doctor is found equally wanting. Smiling ‘his grin for new parents’ he patronises them “‘you have yourselves a cheeky little chappie”’ (GA, p.93). The phrase ‘startles’ the mother, for ‘it’s ridiculous. I shoot Finn a nervous glance, half expecting him to laugh again’ (GA, p.93). Interestingly, the *talking baby* device is also the most successful story in the compilation of *Gas and Air* for capturing the conspiratorial intimacy, the exquisiteness of the moment of bonding between mother and child:

his eyes are two tiny shiny fish shimmering in a net and when I lean over to look at him he smiles at me and says: ‘Hello.’ I glance round the ward; tears spring into my eyes. The other women are sleeping. No one is looking at us so I put my face close to his, smelling his new-bread smell in the midst of the sterile bed and I whisper in astonishment, ‘Hello Finn,’ right back. (GA, p.89)

Following twenty-five years of confusion and denial, moral philosophers contend that literary criticism in English is beginning to rediscover literature as a distinctive mode of thought about what it means to be human. Nussbaum in *Love’s Knowledge* turns to Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* to make her case against ‘Gradgrind-speak’ (scientifically correct but morally void language) and to foreground what she means by moral concepts. Nussbaum’s approach of using the literature of the past



to recover a more value-based time is fit for her purpose. But it does not answer the question of how literature is to move forward. How does one write now? Maybe it is just 'not possible' for us in the twenty-first century, as Eva contends, 'to have a fine, rich, sumptuous life [...] with a beautiful wife and a healthy, growing boy' (*K*, p.39). New life is being delivered into a morally challenging period of human history. The settings of these stories reflect the moral ambiguity of child birth and child rearing in the twenty-first century. The mother and the newborn child is depicted as shrouded in anxiety, surrounded by menace, or in the case of *Kevin*, disengaged from what life means.<sup>41</sup> When Eva asks Kevin

'*What do you like?*' it was a question he was not prepared to answer and that to this day at the age of seventeen he is still unable to answer to his own satisfaction, much less to mine. So I returned to what he didn't like, a subject that would soon prove inexhaustible. (*K*, p.115)

As a consequence of life being 'partly grounded in an impoverished and blinkered philosophy of language' (Haines, p.22), the writers discussed in this thesis are much more able to express what 'they don't like' about motherhood, than what 'they do like' about it. Shriver's Eva aptly illustrates the problem: 'Love, story, content, faith in the human "thing" – the modern incentives are like dirigibles, immense, floating, and few; optimistic, large-hearted, even profound, but ominously ungrounded' (*K*, p.27). With the 'loss of concepts' has come, Haines contends, a 'dilution of experience' (Haines, p.23). Eva reflects that 'spontaneous

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<sup>41</sup> See Judith Warner, *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (New York: Riverhead, 2005).

outpourings of high passions are matters of faith' (K, p.27); she struggles to say or feel anything in response to Kevin's birth: 'Franklin, I felt – absent. I kept scrabbling around in myself for this new *indescribable* emotion [but] it wasn't there' (K, p.81). Part of her problem (which recalls Shelley's comment) is that, as she says:

I wanted what I could not imagine. I wanted to be transformed;  
I wanted to be transported. I wanted a door to open and a  
whole new vista to expand before me that I never knew was  
there. I wanted nothing short of revelation. (K, p.80)

At Kevin's birth, Eva observes that Franklin is also 'filled to the back of [his] throat with a wonderment *that defied expression* [my italics]' (K, p.82). Eva's disappointment at the birth of her child is not unique: Samson's character in *Love at First Sight* admits to 'waiting for something to happen' (GA, p. 30), following the birth of her child. Has the experience of childbirth and child rearing exceeded our ability to conceptualise and, therefore, to communicate? It is noticeable that Nussbaum herself struggles to express exactly what she means by those thicker moral words and concepts, such as humanity, which, again, no longer have the moral resonance they once had. As Shriver, coincidentally, observes: 'considering what people get up to, [humanity is] a queer word to equate with compassion, or even emotional competence' (K, p.78).

Ambivalence offers fertile ground for creative moral reflection in motherhood. When characters overcome the existing taboos that currently surround the expression of negativity towards children, the

exploration of ambivalence reveals a *relationship* between the mother and child: as is demonstrated in *Kevin*. From a psychological perspective, Rozsika Parker argues that

where motherhood is concerned, I think the conflict between love and hate actually spurs mothers on to struggle to understand and know their baby. In other words, the suffering of ambivalence can promote thought – and the capacity to think about the baby and child is arguably the single most important aspect of mothering. (Parker, R., p.9)

Fictional accounts and memoirs of mothering from 1995-2010 do not position the relationship between mother and child as the dominant relationship in the text. *Kevin* is the exception here but the child Kevin too remains largely anonymous. The relationship that dominates these texts is between the mother and her lost self.<sup>42</sup> When cultural expectations allow the mother to be *herself* in motherhood, then mothers and children may be able to live a good life, in the true sense. As it currently stands, these texts suggest that we run the risk of having, as T.S. Eliot expresses it, 'had the experience but missed the meaning'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 'The Dry Salvages', *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p.186.

## Conclusion - Taking Baby Steps

After my initial excitement (and relief) at the iconoclasm directed towards the patriarchal institution of motherhood presented in the texts studied in this thesis, came the realisation that these recent, popular literary representations of motherhood are merely aligning the mother in literature with the scholarly feminist critical theory of the mid-twentieth century to the present day. These novels and memoirs mark a return to second-wave feminist concerns, confirming that motherhood continues to lead to female oppression. Contemporary fiction exposes the falsehoods of postfeminism, whilst re-popularising legitimate feminist issues: putting feminism back on the cultural agenda.

A large part of the argument of this thesis has been devoted to exploring the extent to which depictions of the mother from 1995-2010 critique and disrupt traditional assumptions about motherhood, gender and sex. Scholars are united in their agreement that maternal writing is 'to be understood as a key tool in the redefinition of maternity in which feminists are engaged' (Jeremiah, 'Practices', p.231). Similarly, Frye asserts that the maternal memoir 'participate[s] in the feminist project of disrupting old certainties and moving toward alternative understandings [...] beyond the hazards of essentialism and individualism' (Frye, p.194). Indeed, Podnieks and O'Reilly go so far as to state that 'the emergence of the genre and tradition of matrifocal narratives is crucial [...] in unmasking motherhood and redefining maternity, impart[ing] such empowering depictions of maternal agency' (Podnieks and O'Reilly, p.18).

But to what degree does this emergence of maternal dissatisfaction in literature offer different or innovative options for mothers now and in the future? Unlike their fictional predecessors, the mothers of this turn of the century fiction (such as Eva in *Kevin*, the mother in *Incendiary*, Ammu in *Small Things* and Ruth in *The Little House*) now fight back.<sup>1</sup> And, unlike the individual voices of maternal dissent of the literature of the past, this most recent protest forms a chorus of disapproval that defines an *entire genre* of mainstream motherhood literature. As long ago as 1976, however, Rich believed that she was witnessing a transformation in cultural perceptions of motherhood, claiming that 'the words are being spoken now, are being written down, the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through' (Rich, p.239). Yet over thirty years later, feminist and literary critics are excitedly observing this same process happening "now" with "mummy lit". For the last three decades, feminist critics appear to have been 'posing and re-posing these same concerns' (Frye, p.188).

Whilst the fiction and memoir considered here certainly offers a potent critique of 'the power stolen from [the mother] and the power withheld from [the mother] in the name of the institution of motherhood' (Rich, p.275), it is significantly less successful at envisaging Rich's proposal for 'mothering with agency', urging the mother 'to refuse to be a victim and go on from there'

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<sup>1</sup> Faludi humorously claims that 'the heroine of the early feminist novel – with some exceptions – was no feminist firebrand. Frequently befuddled, a little dopey, and a lot doped – a state generally induced by combined Valium and vacuuming – she was less the Medea than the Ophelia of Long Island, half dead and adrift in the family pool' (Faludi, p.518). Examples of feminist literature from the 1960s and 1970s include Johanna Davis, *Life Signs* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), Penelope Mortimer, *The Pumpkin Eater* (1964), and Hannah Gavron's sociology doctoral thesis which was published posthumously following her tragic suicide in 1965. Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1966).

(Rich, p.246). Maternal agency has recently become a focal point for maternal scholarship, with research suggesting that resisting portraits of the mother in literature provide a demonstration of empowered mothering. How “empowered” mothering is defined varies subtly from scholar to scholar. Podnieks and O'Reilly describe it as conferring on ‘mothers the agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy denied to them in patriarchal motherhood’ (Podnieks and O'Reilly, p.18). Bronwyn Davies defines maternal agency as

the ability to recognise discursive constitutions of self and to resist, subvert, and change the discourses through which one is being constituted. It is the freedom to recognise multiple readings such that no discursive practice [...] can capture and control one's identity.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas Amy Middleton asserts that maternal agency empowers mothers to ‘face and resist the pressure of other people's policing of their mothering, and, in fact, gain confidence in doing so’.<sup>3</sup>

Collectively, these definitions suggest that empowered mothering is demonstrated through a mother's authority, confidence and will to change patriarchal motherhood. Whilst the depictions of motherhood considered in this thesis resist the restrictive nature of the institution of motherhood, they only go so far in their imaginings of maternal agency. This literature falls short

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<sup>2</sup> Bronwyn Davies, ‘The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis’, *Social Analysis*, 30, (1991), 42-53 (p.51), cited in Podnieks and O'Reilly, p.18.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Middleton, ‘Mothering Under Duress: Examining the Inclusiveness of Feminist Mothering Theory’, *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 8.1&2, (2006), 72-81 (p.74), cited in Podnieks and O'Reilly, p.18.

of suggesting real and radical changes to the ways in which we mother. Maternal agency in these texts is articulated through subversion as opposed to change and victory. These novels find new ways to describe how we live, rather than exploring new ways to live.

Disappointingly, the conservative nature of the conclusions to these novels serves to reinforce the “inescapability” of existing patterns: destruction, alienation, incarceration and assimilation are (without exception) the fates to befall those characters guilty of maternal dissent. Gregory’s novel *The Little House* provides an apt illustration of the dearth of alternatives to patriarchal motherhood envisaged in this literature. Elizabeth as ‘Mother’ (*LH*, p.357) is the embodiment of patriarchal motherhood and as such has effectively restricted and regulated her daughter-in-law Ruth’s relationship with her own child, to the point where Ruth is only allowed supervised access to her baby. By the novel’s end, the previously passive and credulous Ruth concludes that she has no choice but to fight Elizabeth, and, due to the intransigent and powerful nature of her adversary, conceives of a highly symbolic (and comic) plan to rid herself of Elizabeth, permanently.

Replacing her baby with a bundle of blankets, Ruth electrifies the steel frame of the pram with live cable concealed under fallen leaves and awaits Elizabeth’s arrival:

through the window Ruth saw Elizabeth walk in the garden gate without invitation, as she always did, looking around her with pleasure, as she always did, at her garden and her little house. She strolled up to the

pram, put both hands on the pram handle, and leaned in, as she had been asked – so many times – not to do.

'There you are, then,' Ruth remarked inconsequentially, and switched on.

There was a sudden movement as Elizabeth was flung several feet backwards from the pram. Her legs kicked, her arms flailed, and then she was still: completely still. (*LH*, p.356)

Ruth escapes punishment for Elizabeth's murder by replacing the pram with a faulty lawn mower before raising the alarm. She has vanquished the interference, judgement, surveillance and prescriptivism inherent in patriarchal motherhood and is now free to begin to mother on her terms. Ruth's triumph soon turns to disappointment for the reader, however, as Ruth's journey ends with her merely assuming her mother-in-law's position and role in the family. The novel either refuses (or is unable) to imagine and implement an alternative mode of mothering. Ruth moves her family out of the little house and into her father-in-law's more substantial home. She agrees to look after three generations of Cleary men in exchange for the master bedroom suite and an opportunity to redecorate.

The conclusion to *The Little House* (and to the other novels discussed in this thesis) clearly intends to highlight the enormity of the task of trying to change a system 'that suited them all very well' (*LH*, p.353): although the conformist nature of these novels' endings is all the more surprising given that this thesis explores representations of motherhood in relation to an historical period that Anthony Giddens describes as the 'discontinuities of modernity'



(Giddens, p.46). Whereas Giddens argues that modernity is defined by 'the sheer pace and scope of change [that] has produced a different kind of social order, [and] that such change is constant, [with] our knowledge of instability itself contributing to the world's mutable character' (Giddens, p.45), this body of fiction reveals patriarchal motherhood to be immutable. By exposing the discourses through which the mother is constituted, only to reveal her as a "captured" and "controlled" identity at the close of these novels, suggests that not only is resistance futile but also implies an impediment to the literary imagination.

The only alternative to the feminine mystique inherent in patriarchal conceptions of motherhood to feature in this literature from 1995-2010 is the male/female hybrid mother attempting to "have it all". Valorised by postfeminism, this mother figure is exposed by the literature discussed in this thesis (to use Faludi's expression) as a 'slick con trick' ('Single', p.2).

Jeremiah, however, argues that Shriver's novel *Kevin* is exercising maternal agency in the way it "overturns" or "queers" dominant ideas about gender.<sup>4</sup>

Jeremiah observes that 'the ideologies of motherhood and femininity are closely intertwined, even interdependent. To disrupt one - to suggest, for example, that women might not be naturally caring and selfless - is to disrupt the other in, one hopes, productive and interesting ways' (Jeremiah, p.170).

However, one struggles to see how Shriver's 'critique [of] the idea of the heterosexual family' (Jeremiah, p.180) contributes to 'new ideas of sex and of parenting' (Podnieks and O'Reilly, p.17). Despite Jeremiah's assertion

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<sup>4</sup> Emily Jeremiah, 'We Need to Talk about Gender: Mothering and Masculinity in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*', in Podnieks and O'Reilly, pp.169-82 (p.169).

that the novel opens 'up new lines of enquiry' (Jeremiah, p.181), *Kevin* refuses to envisage what form these will take. As a possible model for empowered motherhood, Eva's 'female masculinity' (Jeremiah, p.173) has been discounted, since it is linked to the disintegration of her family and potentially to the production of a serial killer. Jeremiah concludes that "Having it All" has clearly not worked out for [Eva] and retreat into isolation is the only possible option: a damning indictment of contemporary motherhood' (Jeremiah, p.173). It is a bad day for feminism where, through a dearth of alternatives, we are forced to celebrate Eva's lack of empathy for her child.

Cusk's life writing confirms a lack of scope for mothering with agency within existing, patriarchal, social structures. In *A Life's Work*, Cusk introduces her family as it is about to embark on a radical realignment of conventional domestic arrangements:

a decision was made to demolish traditional family culture altogether, and it was regarded by other people with amazement, approval and horror. The most punitive, unworkable version of family life appears to be less worthy of general comment and concern than simple unconventionality. My partner left his job. (*ALW*, p.7)

Cusk brings her readers up-to-date with her family's attempt at role-reversal in 'Aftermath' (2011). In describing this childcare regime, Cusk acknowledges that she 'reverted to my old male-inflected identity; and I conscripted my husband into care of the children. He was to take the part of that twin, femininity [...] my notion was that we would live together as two hybrids, each

of us half male and half female. That was equality, was it not?' ('Aftermath', p.22). She attributes her discomfort with traditional notions of femininity and the-stay-at-home mother to having grown up with feminism:

In the generational transition between my mother and myself, a migration of sorts had indeed occurred. My mother may have been my place of birth, but my adopted nationality was my father's [....]. Yet my father's aspirations – to succeed, to win, to provide – did not quite fit me either: they were like a suit of clothes made for someone else, but they were what were available. So I wore them and felt a little uncomfortable, a little unsexed, but clothed all the same. Both my parents encouraged this form of cross-dressing [....]. I got into Oxford, my sister to Cambridge, egged on by them both, immigrants to the new country of sexual equality who hoped to achieve assimilation through the second generation. ('Aftermath', p.17)

As Cusk suggests, this form of cross-dressing (or the female masculinity discussed by Jeremiah in relation to Shriver's Eva) proves not to be a comfortable fit or, indeed, a way to achieve sexual equality: 'what I lived as feminism were in fact the male values my parents, among others, well-meaningly bequeathed me – the cross-dressing values of my father, and the anti-feminine values of my mother. So I am not a feminist. I am a self-hating transvestite' ('Aftermath', p.19). Rather than heralding a new dawn in parenting arrangements, the role-reversal adopted in Cusk's family led to the breakdown of her marriage, because 'these irreconcilable principles – the

traditional and the radical, the story and the truth – had out of their hostility hatched a kind of cancer’ (‘Aftermath’, p.28).

Clearly, this real-life depiction and the fictional representations of motherhood discussed in this thesis cannot break free from the constraints of patriarchy or patriarchal representation.<sup>5</sup> These mother portraits relate sufficiently to what is known, understood and expected for readers to decide what is significant about them or about any deviations from the “norm”. Just prior to the commencement of the literary period discussed in this thesis, French commented on the fundamentally conservative nature of literature in 1993: ‘in literature, conventions are formulas accepted by both author and audience as symbolising the basic truths of their society. They are most powerful in the areas of greatest confusion and ambiguity – gender, race and class’ (French, p.x). In 2009 (at the end of my period of interest), Cusk is forced to concur with Woolf’s suggestion in *A Room of One’s Own* ‘that the world – and hence its representations in art - is demonstrably male; and [...] that a woman cannot create art out of a male reality’ (‘Shakespeare’s daughters’, p.2). In patriarchal culture, therefore, ‘we find few models, in literature or in life, of maternal agency in empowered mothering’ (Podnieks and O’Reilly, p.18): and the recent explosion of motherhood literature has done little to change this fact. By not being able to imagine a better future for mothers and their children, the “truth” these novels and memoir reveal is that there is no alternative but to mother by patriarchal rules.

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<sup>5</sup> Whereas Cusk’s own attempts to achieve equality in motherhood is obviously limited by real life restrictions, it is surprising that fiction, free from these constraints, does not even attempt to imagine alternatives or possible solutions.

Cusk argues that women's writing, therefore, 'might be another name for the book of repetition [...] fiction that concerns itself with what is eternal and unvarying, with domesticity and motherhood and family life' ('Shakespeare's daughters', p.5). "Mummy lit" reflects a 'world [that] is constantly evolving, while the family endeavours to stay the same. Updated, refurbished, modernised, but essentially the same. A house in a landscape, both shelter and prison' ('Aftermath', p.28). In a male dominated society and with a literature that reflects this 'male reality' ('Shakespeare's daughters', p.2), it is perhaps to be anticipated that 'mummy lit's' 'challenge remains at the level of criticism and not change' (O'Reilly, p.210).

Little wonder, then, that feminism has spent more than thirty years 'posing and re-posing these same concerns' (Frye, p.188). DiQuinzio laments that 'it is impossible for feminist theory to avoid the issue of motherhood, and it is impossible for feminist theory to resolve it' (DiQuinzio, p.xx). To represent maternity as offering any number of empowered choices, as postfeminism does, has been to mislead and distract a generation of women. The notion of choice, as third-wave feminist theory and the literature in this thesis has shown us, 'is a liberal fiction that serves to disguise and justify social inequalities, particularly those of gender' (O'Reilly, p. 208).<sup>6</sup>

Recalling the contribution made by the women's liberation fiction writers of the 1960s and 1970s, Faludi contends that

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<sup>6</sup> Because of poverty or a dearth of opportunity, many mothers have little choice in how they organise their lives. In discussing the film version of *I Don't Know How She Does It*, Kate Banyard observes that 'the film never explores the "underclass" of women, the cleaners and nannies, who support the life of the professional woman while still having to juggle their own lives without that support'. Helen Rumblelow, 'Is "*I Don't Know How She Does It*" anti-women?', *The Times*, 15 September 2011 <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/article3164450.ece?lightbox=false>> [accessed 15 September 2011] (p.4)

they succeeded in stripping away the flowery wall coverings, but they hadn't burnt down the house. They were madwomen who didn't know how to be *mad* women, how to turn that internal impoverishment and discontent into constructive and political anger, how to create lasting change for themselves and for other women. They were disturbed but they didn't disturb the peace. They were aggrieved angels, not avenging ones. When they did damage, it was only to themselves. (Faludi, p.519)

This thesis concludes that, in the novels from 1995-2010, mothers are now '*mad*' women and, in the case of Ruth in *The Little House*, have even become 'avenging' angels. Mothers, however, also continue to be depicted as victims. They either relinquish jobs they love, become 'boring saint[s]' (HY, p.55) or lose a child. Some of these fictional mothers have attempted to 'burn down the house', some have stripped 'away the flowery wall coverings' but all, eventually, succumb to the dominant discourse of self-sacrifice in motherhood. Nevertheless, even though the fiction and memoir of the millennium is unable to imagine a better world, it certainly leaves us with a chillingly accurate perception of this one.

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