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The Sacred Space of the "Mother-House"

Reading Maternal Metaphors in Antonia White's Frost in May

First published in 1933, Antonia White's *Frost in May* recounts the experiences of Nanda Grey, a young pupil at a Catholic convent school in England. Released by her newly converted Catholic father into the care of nuns, Nanda's story explores her subsequent development within an enclosed female community. Within this setting, White challenges the traditional notion of the convent as a site of female duty and subservience to an elevated patriarchal authority. Conventional narratives of convent life have repeatedly sought to cast the female religious in the role of the devoted Bride of Christ, or the dutiful daughter of the Father's House. However, in *Frost in May* White undermines convention, enabling the reader to glimpse this unique female space as the "Mother-House," a metaphor for the devoted, nurturing relationship between mother and child.

It has been suggested that White's *Frost in May* quartet of novels clearly invites a Freudian reading of the troubled father-daughter relationship, which unites the texts. I seek to contend through this reading, however, that by re-imagining the convent as the enclosed space of the maternal realm, it is possible to read against the dominance of the patriarchal script. The complexities and ambivalences of the mother-daughter relationship are therefore re-enacted within the narrative space of the convent through the fractured communities of the female religious and their impressionable charges. Under the imposing gaze of the Catholic arch-patriarchy, this sacred "Mother-House" is endowed with the necessary autonomy to nurture a community of young girls into a generation of educated women.

For Nanda's Reverend Mother and her devoted female staff, the image of the convent represents a site of sanctified female congregation. The extent to which the material edifice of the convent stands to house an organic sisterhood

of female religious, is captured in Antonia White's depiction of a traditional convent education. White's young protagonist, Nanda Grey, enters the Convent of the Five Wounds as a pupil of Lippington. The daughter of a Catholic convert, Nanda is to become acutely aware of the ancient community upon which her school is founded. While the walls of Lippington are founded upon the lives of the female saints which pervade the school textbooks, so the Five Wounds operates as a literary reconstruction of the author's own education at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Roehampton, England.

The convent, therefore, as an institution immersed in female history and maintained by female industry, offers sanctuary from the assumed hierarchies of patriarchy and woman's place within it. Divergent streams of thought have emerged which position the convent's structure of authority on both sides of the gender divide. Depicted in both religious and secular literatures as the "Mother-House," the home of the female religious is both the protective sanctuary of the maternal realm and the archetypal domestic scene, labouring under the almighty Law of the Father. It is the ambiguous status of this unique female community, which pervades Nanda's experience of convent education in *Frost in May*.

An implicit focus of Antonia White's *Frost in May* is directed upon the role of the convent as a grooming stable for respectable young ladies who will eventually "come out" as society wives, or "enter" into a holy marriage as Brides of Christ. However, enclosed within the intensely female domain of the convent, the congregation of nuns and their charges enter into a complex re-enactment of the mother-daughter relationship. By engaging in a reading of the text as a symbolic reconstruction of this intimate female bond, it is possible to challenge the dominant Freudian script, which seeks to privilege the father's relationship to the daughter. While Antonia White's narrative clearly aligns itself to this most conventional of psychoanalytic plots, to read against this by foregrounding moments of maternal significance, enables the reader to glimpse the rich complexities of the enclosed female community.

Within this metaphorical context the institution of the "Mother-House" is endowed with the discipline and protection of the maternal realm. As a sanctuary from the external world, its children are enabled to explore the boundaries of their existence in relative safety. Nanda, however, is divided in her loyalty to this sacred environment, as she struggles to maintain an attachment to her earthly mother. The closed community of the convent determines to guard against the intrusion of external influence upon its children and, therefore, restricts supposed intruders from breaking its bonds of intimacy. Thus, interaction between Nanda and her parents is highly regulated and must observe rigid convent convention, "At Lippington one did not even meet one's nearest relatives without surveillance" (White, 1978: 37). While it is customary for the girls to curtsey to both her parents and the surveillante as a mark of formality and emotional distance, Nanda's mother fails to observe convention in a demonstrative act of affection, "Mr Grey stood up to greet

Nanda, but her mother quite spoilt her careful curtsey by pouncing on her and kissing her" (37). It is Mrs Grey who assumes the role of the wilful child, while Nanda and her father attempt to abide by the laws of the house:

> "Visitors are not allowed beyond this board." Nanda had some difficulty in restraining her mother from darting away down various forbidden alleys, but, helped by her father, she kept her in fairly good order. (38)

As Nanda is forced to relinquish her primary maternal attachment, within the "Mother-House" of the Five Wounds, the nuns appear to usurp the natural identity of the mother. Each appointed to fulfil a different aspect of the mothering process, from Mother of Discipline, to Mother Regan "the flustered Irish infirmarian" (White, 1978: 96), the community closes upon its daughters as the all-embracing mother. However, this fractured construction of motherhood acts also as a rejection of the monolithic mother figure in whose embrace the child is utterly submerged.

This all-consuming figure is the mother which haunts the Freudian script, and who the child must reject if she is to form an autonomous selfhood. Thus, the child of the convent experiences the myriad functions attributed to the care of the maternal realm, without being placed at risk of suffocation. This radical reconfiguration of motherhood can be placed in close alignment to representations of the ideal mother in theories of feminist utopianism. As Lucy Sargisson indicates in *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*:

> The utopian child is not the property of its mother, this newly empowered, ultra-feminine being; rather child-care and birth are identified as a communal function; non-claustrophobic and non-repressive. (1996: 32)

It is the vast catalogue of maternal functions contained within the structure of the convent that aligns it to the cultural model of motherhood indicated by Elisabeth Badinter. In her study of an historical view of the maternal instinct in *The Myth of Motherhood*, Badinter recognises the need for the mother to fulfil the educational and moral needs of the child as well as aiding its biological development. For women of the modern age therefore:

> Motherhood took on a new and different meaning. Enriched by new duties, it extended beyond the inevitable nine months to include responsibility for children's proper upbringing and a major part of their intellectual development [...] The role of teacher was added to those of protector, nurse and moral example [...] She would be her child's teacher as well as source of inspiration, counsellor and confidante. (1981: 227)

The image of the benevolent mother-figure, whose personal freedom is sacrificed to a life of devotion, elicits the iconic status of the nun and as such unites the two in a mutual vocation. Thus, as Badinter continues, "all mothers have the same 'mission,' all have to consecrate themselves in this holy office and sacrifice their will and pleasure for the good of the family" (1981: 235). However, in contrast to the natural mother for whom this act of sacrifice is considered culturally compulsory, the nurturing of another woman's child is invested with a saintly goodness.

While the convent assumes the significance of the sanctified maternal realm, the daughter raised within its walls is granted a blessed female inheritance. As a place of protection from the prescribed femininities of the secular world, the "Mother-House" comes to represent a sacred space of re-definition. Within its matriarchal structures, an autonomous female subjectivity is able to develop, divorced from the intrusions and expectations of male authority figures.

As a site of intense female attachment the convent of the Five Wounds encloses its young, female charges within the confines of an oppressive intimacy. Thus, within a psychoanalytic reading of these enclosed female spaces as symbolic of the maternal realm, such intimacy signifies the primary attachment between mother and daughter. Contained within a space of mutual captivation, mother and daughter represent a complete entity, defined only by their sameness and difference from each other. While the pre-oedipal daughter identifies herself in the reflected image of the mother, she remains desperate to seek selfhood beyond the bounds of their relationship. It is the ambivalence inherent within female pre-oedipal attachment which Nancy Chodorow foregrounds as the defining feature of the maternal relationship. In her discussion of the complex intimacy of this bond in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow argues that, "It sustains the mother-infant exclusivity and the intensity, ambivalence, and boundary confusion of the child still preoccupied with issues of dependence and individuation" (1978: 97). This Freudian narrative is strikingly evident in the maternal metaphors of *Frost in May* as White's perceived daughter-figures resist the enclosed space of the mother.

The psychoanalytic interpretation of maternal ambivalence as a primary indicator of female development is anticipated by Antonia White to inform her depiction of the relationship between Nanda and Mother Frances. Primarily responsible for Nanda's educational development at Lippington, it is her power to both captivate and incite rebellion in her student, which marks the narrative significance of her character. While fixed in awe at the beauty of her new teacher, Nanda intuitively recognises the unspoken hostility that exists between them:

> Yet all this beauty seemed to Nanda to be touched with frost. Mother Frances looked too rare, too exquisite to be quite real. During the long,

> amused look the nun gave her, Nanda thought to herself first: "She's like the Snow Queen," and then: "I shall never be comfortable with her." (White, 1978: 22)

In this context it is clearly apparent that the ambivalent nature of Nanda and Mother Frances's relationship is entirely mutual. Whether in reaction to her student's obvious discomfort, or in the hope of developing greater strength of character, Mother Frances engages Nanda in an uncompromising battle of wills:

> It seemed to Nanda that Mother Frances was keeping a particularly vigilant eye on her. Evidently, she was waiting for a chance to pounce on some lapse and take Nanda's exemption. But she was determined to defy Mother Frances. Whenever she felt her mistress" sarcastic gaze on her, she behaved more exasperatingly well than ever. (1978: 48)

While silently hostile in tone, the intimate nature of this interaction proves increasingly progressive. Mother Frances's actions incite a passionate reaction in Nanda to gracefully observe the rules of the convent and to achieve the subsequent rewards. In this respect, Nanda is able to experience the privileges and "Permissions" afforded to obedient members of the convent community, while unafraid of challenging its authority figures. In her desire to achieve this, Mother Frances emerges as a prominent maternal figure in the text, determined to produce independent and empowered young women. It is only in contemplation of Mother Frances's untimely death that Nanda glimpses self-recognition in remembrance of this complex mother-figure and is finally forced to consider the nature of her own mortality:

> It was only a few days since they had buried Mother Frances. Her death had not made very much of an impression on Nanda at the time, but now it was real and terrifying as if a pain had begun to pierce the fog of an anaesthetic. Mother Frances had died, here in this house, only a week ago. She, Nanda, must die at some time, perhaps very soon. (White, 1978: 99)

Thus, the overtly protective maternal instincts inherent in Mother Frances's involvement in Nanda's convent upbringing, awakens her charge to the double-aspects of both conformity and confinement; rebellion and release.

While somewhat weakened by the nature of Nanda's female education, the Lippington girls remain seemingly secure within the walls of the "Mother-House." However, as White's narrative intimates, the convent operates under the jurisdiction of the patriarchal institution of the Roman Catholic Church, and as such is penetrated by the authority of the father figure. Ultimately defined by his physical absence, the presence of God the Father is endowed

with absolute dominance over this enclosed female community. While the female religious are granted a maternal and domestic authority within the realm of the "Mother-House," therefore, it is the conceptualised image of God which assumes the all embracing authority of Amy Allenby's construction of "The Father Archetype in Female Psychology." The culturally perceived notion of the paternal role, articulated by Allenby in an assessment of contemporary Jungian perpectives of the father, suggests that: "In his archetypal relevance, the father [...] represents the larger world ruled by instinct and spirit; he represents authority and law, the realm of ideas, the domain of religious and spiritual values" (1985: 137).

White punctuates her narrative construction of the convent with a double image of the omnipotent father figure. As an earthly vessel for God the Father, the visiting cardinal to the school and convent is also an embodied representative of the patriarchal authority of the Church. The status and detachment of this fleeting guest disrupts the order of convent life and demotes the female authority figures to positions of subordination. Thus Nanda's perception of the Five Wounds as an imposing matriarchy is shattered in this moment:

> The cardinal did at last appear, and was received with due Splendour [...] the children went about for three whole days in their best white uniforms, and the chapel blazed with hundreds of candles. The cardinal moved freely about the school, attended by his secretaries and Reverend Mother [...] As she swept a nervous curtsey and kissed the huge amethyst on his finger, his handsome, peevish old face would nod to her and murmur a vague blessing. (White, 1978: 171)

For the daughters of the convent, the cardinal symbolizes the power and unquestioned authority of the father. In this fleeting moment they are reminded that while enclosed within the walls of the "Mother-House," they are to abide by the law of the father.

For Nanda Grey, compliance with patriarchal authority assumes a double significance. As Mr Grey occupies position of powerful influence over his daughter, Nanda is effectively caught between the authority of her natural father and the wishes of the Church. Thus, as Simone de Beauvoir indicates of the dual hierarchies of her existence, "for a pious little girl, her relations with the everlasting father are analogous to those she has with the earthly father" (1997: 317).

Ultimately, Antonia White affords the nature of gendered authority within her text an earthly significance, as the fate of Nanda's convent education resides within the paternal power of Mr Grey. Outraged by the "disgusting and vulgar fifth" that he believes constitutes Nanda's attempts at novel writing, Mr Grey demands that she should leave the enclosed female space of the convent, to return to the domestic order of the Father's House. As this patriarchal figure asserts his authority, he assumes the powerful detachment

of the archetypal father:

> Her father was speaking again, but though she heard him distinctly, in spite of her sobbing, the words made no impression. All her consciousness was withdrawn into one burning centre of pain and misery, and the sounds merely beat on a numbed outer skin. (White, 1978: 216)

While Nanda is comforted and placated by the maternal figures of both her own mother and Mother Radcliffe, their female presence is eclipsed by the verbal impact of the law of the father:

> The whole world had fallen away and left her stranded in this one spot alone for ever and ever with her father and those awful words. She felt her mother touch her sleeve and shook her off, blindly, mechanically, hardly knowing that she was there. (White, 1978: 216)

Once again, the seeming autonomy of the "Mother-House" has to relinquish power and influence over its daughters to the demands of a higher patriarchal authority.

The image of the sacred mother is therefore placed in a position of subordination toward the father, compliant with his wishes and willing to enforce them. It is this subversion of maternal attachment which Simone de Beauvoir foregrounds as the cultural function of motherhood in a patriarchal society. De Beauvoir signifies in *The Second Sex* that:

> Even if it is in fact the mother who rules as mistress of the household, she is commonly clever enough to see to it that the father's wishes come first; in important matters the mother demands, rewards and punishes in his name and through his authority. (1997: 314)

Despite the attachments of intense intimacy which exist between "mother" and "daughter" in the enclosed space of the "Mother-House," patriarchal intrusion threatens any possibility of an autonomous female community within its walls. While a convent education from the Five Wounds encourages dedication to a different set of marriage vows, commitment to a diverse community of women and the ability to challenge the borders of an enclosed existence, it does, nevertheless advocate conformity, obedience and absolute devotion to the 'everlasting father'. Thus, Antonia White permeates the maternal realm of the convent with the unquestioned hierarchies of patriarchal authority.

Caught between the ambivalent maternal attachment of the convent and the patriarchal dominance of her father's house, Nanda Grey receives a comprehensive education in gender conformity. Her only means of escape from

the confines of her environment exist in the form of forbidden departures into fiction and her creative imagination. Thus, as Nanda will later discover under the name of Clara in the Nazareth asylum in White's later novel *Beyond the Glass*, writing and the construction of fantasy provides release from mental, religious and gendered confinement. Already found guilty of expressing devotion to a female friend, Nanda's enforced dismissal from the convent follows the discovery of a manuscript, which effectively re-draws the gendered boundaries of her enclosure. Assuming the maternal role of creator and enforcer of wills, Nanda constructs a narrative in which a disempowered hero, "an entirely original creation" (White, 1978: 202) is forced to enter a Trappist monastery, in which the force of his words will never be heard again. While this may represent the narrative of an enclosed world which Antonia White could only imagine, her female protégé dreams of a different community. Nanda's irrepressible desire to describe "a brilliant, wicked, worldly society, preferably composed of painters, musicians and peers," in which, "too much piety would conflict with a really exciting plot" (158), envisages a female community entirely devoid of gendered or creative restrictions. Somewhat ironically, it was within such a community that Antonia White was able to so vividly re-imagine the enclosed, maternal community of the convent.

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