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Beyond the “World of Guilt and Sorrow” *Separation, Attachment and Creativity in Literary Mothers and Sons*

Robert Munsch’s (1991) book for children, *Love You Forever*, tells the story of the mother-son relationship over the life span. In the story, a boy, first as a baby, then toddler, preschooler, adolescent, and adult is shown in a relationship with his mother who is young, middle aged, and, finally, senescent. As an old woman, the mother urgently requests the presence and solicitude of her son in a way that echoes the care she gave to him earlier; the relationship has been inverted. The son, after a visit to his mother who is near death, returns home and repeats his mother’s tender refrain about unconditional love to his baby daughter.

It would be easy to dismiss this story as a sentimental portrayal of mothers and sons. Some would suggest that the story is inaccurate in its representation, for here it is a son rather than a daughter who reproduces mothering, contra Nancy Chodorow (1979). Also, this is a representation of a son who doesn’t truly separate from his mother but rather retains a kind of allegiance to her power, a power that he keeps alive. Sentimental? Inaccurate? Maybe. Yet the book has had 56 printings since its publication in 1986. This popularity suggests that Munsch’s story, unwittingly perhaps, reflects and provides a model for the qualities and theoretical concerns at work in the production and reception of many texts that feature mothers and sons.

How does the mother influence the son’s construction of ego, the task, as literary and age theorist Constance Rooke (1992) sees it, belonging to the first life phase? How does the son affect the mother’s “carefully designed and self-assured maturity” and how is he affected by it? If the task of old age is “deconstruction of ego,” a willingness to relinquish social power (Rooke, 1992: 245), then why does the mother cry out in need to her son in old age? As the disintegration of ego continues in age, does it reflect the psychoanalytic belief

that the mother is completed through the life of the son (Freud, 1933: 133)? In the mother's mind, does the son now hold the power to bring coherence to her life, as she provided coherence for him in the mirror stage of infancy?

And how is it for the sons along the life course? For men, the mother assumes an almost clichéd omnipotence in their lives and in their texts; she exists, they seem to say, to thwart creativity at the same time she is the source of it. This implies that the concept of separation and detachment does not seem to occur in actual practice, as attachment theorists point out. Lillian Troll and Jean Smith (1976), for instance, argue that “[p]arent-child ties are not necessarily terminated at the age of 2, or at the time the ‘Oedipal crisis,’ or even during adolescence or young adulthood. In fact, they may not even be terminated by death—that is, the death of one of the people involved” (156). The invisible, but absolute, power of the mother lives on. Paul Olsen in *Sons of Mothers* notes that a man “can grow up, build a career, marry and have children, arrange for his mother’s funeral, die. And through it all she will always be the most crucial, most dynamic, and most powerfully influential force in his life” (1981: 58). D.H. Lawrence wrote in *Sons and Lovers* that “[t]here was one place in the world that stood solid and did not melt into unreality: the place where his mother was. Everybody else could grow shadowy, almost non-existent to him, but she could not. It was as if the pivot and pole of his life, from which he could not escape, was his mother” (1913: 233). And John Updike: “She was in him not as he had been in her, as a seed becoming a little idol, but as the full web of his perceptions and reactions; he had led his life as an extension of hers, and when she died he became custodian of all his little images of her, of his thousand tiny nuanced ‘understandings’ of her, like the words of a once commonplace language of which he was now the sole surviving speaker ...” (1992: 35-36). What are we to make of these texts, these anxious testimonies concerning the loss and recovery of the maternal?

The answer to this and to other questions concerning this significant relationship are still being formulated. Although this is one of life’s most permanent and powerful relationships, mothers and sons have not been much studied. Interestingly, the United States’ Library of Congress lists only seven titles between 1968 and the mid-1990s with “mothers and sons in literature” as a descriptor.¹ Why is this relationship ignored by researchers? As Linda Fennie Forcey (1987) observes in her book *Mothers of Sons*, until recently, feminism disregarded “the paradoxical in human relationships, with one notable exception, mother-daughter relationships. There feminists felt comfortable.” On the other hand, the mother-son relationship is, Forcey notes, a “taboo topic” (2).

This article outlines the emotional geography of this mother-son relationship over the life span as it is represented and reconstructed in literature. How does this relationship function as a catalyst or inhibitor of mutual creativity across life? For the son, at least as Olsen (1981), Lawrence (1913), and Updike (1992) see it, the mother is problematic: the source of their own creativity and

production, but at the price of their own freedom. This situation suggests the familiar paradigm of successful artist but failed person, a paradigm built with “mother” at the foundation. Pamela Bowker argues in her profound and provocative, but little-known study published in 1996, *The Grief Taboo in American Literature: Loss and Prolonged Adolescence in Twain, Melville, and Hemingway*, that repressed grief and unexpressed mourning—mourning specifically for the mother—is the wellspring of canonical American literature. The repression of feminine sensibility, indeed, of the female herself are, as she puts it, “central ingredients in the creative processes and the fictional products of the male American author” (3). The internal struggle of canonical American male writers between separation and attachment from the mother enables the creation of what Bowker calls “non-phallic masculinity at the heart of the traditional male canon” (3)—a feminine center that continues to remain invisible to literary practitioners.

Yet, as Bowker (1996) points out, men cannot—or do not—forgo the internal struggle with the mother and her image. The characteristic American literary heroic retreat into the Ideal—the world of ideas, abstractions, and utopia—is, in fact, a retreat from the daily world with its sensual data and conscious reminders of the mother and concomitant sexual complications. Bowker discusses this, as did Leslie Fiedler (1975) before her. Moreover, the tendency of the American literary hero to wander, to simultaneously seek and escape—think of Huckleberry Finn—and to constantly desire renewal is a strategy, Bowker maintains, for avoiding grief associated with separating from the mother. The heroic energy is consistently misdirected; the frenzy obscures the true object. And because the ostensible object—idealized nature, for instance—is removed from the true object—the mother—the grief never ends, the mourning never stops. The male writer’s failure to acknowledge that it is mother at the source drives the literary production, creating the classic American hero: the isolated, adolescent wanderer headed for the territory on some ill-defined quest. Bowker mentions that in contrast, grief in literature by women tends to be overtly expressed, rather than sublimated or denied. I will take issue with this assumption in a moment.

The psychoanalytic texts of Freud (1953, 1933), John Bowlby (1973), D. W. Winnicott (1965, 1971), Alice Balint (1952), and Melanie Klein (1975), among others, do show that the relationship at each life stage is guided by the desire for a kind of innocence or renewal, which is actually a recapitulation of the desire to recover the perfect love of the mother during infancy. Balint (1952) theorizes that this is the source of all erotic striving. Bowker (1996), however, sees the desire for rebirth as a way to disavow and repress mother love and loss. The American ideal of renewal and regeneration, and the concomitant rejection of history, the failure of the generational passing of legacy from father to son, seems to suggest the primacy of the mother’s influence on the son. Think of the flight into Nature of the Transcendentalists and Walt Whitman, which can be interpreted as expressions of longing for the pre-Oedipal mother. The

loss of the mother in the developmental process or in the unexpected event of untimely death—and the grief that this engenders—has no cultural outlet; it leads to what sociologists now call disenfranchised grief. It also leads to great art, art characterized by a frozen adolescence replacing the mother with a wife many years hence. In classic psychoanalysis this drama always is told in terms of the child, in terms of his developmental necessity. Feminists have complained for years that the Freudian model is based on the man's point of view of the boy's development, a model that denies the mother's subjectivity, as E. Ann Kaplan (1992), among others, points out.

So what is the mother's position and viewpoint of the Oedipal stage? Does she fear the loss, and then does she grieve the loss of her son who must, as the story goes, reject her in order to develop? I propose that the mother indeed has a struggle here, and that this struggle is a battle to retain attachment to her child, to extend the love and symbiosis of the pre-Oedipal stage, to preserve the union from unnecessary rupture. This battle and the inevitable grief suffered by the mother as a result of losing it present themselves in women's literature only indirectly, in a kind of code through metaphor and symbol; this aspect of indirection women-authored literature shares with its male counterparts, despite Bowker's (1996) claim to the contrary. However, the loss—even the fear of the loss—engenders tremendous sorrow for the mother, but it is sorrow that has no cultural outlet; the result is disenfranchised grief. And this grief of the mother at her inability to keep the blissful closeness and protection shared in earlier stages leads to resentment and deep despondency. Thus, the central themes of many literary women and their women characters has to do with their attachments to their sons and their resistance to the loss of their sons. In old age, however, women recover their lost sons, just as the mother does in the Robert Munsch (1991) children's book I mentioned in my opening. I will show this metaphoric grief and recovery at several stages in the life course, using several authors' representations.

I begin with motherhood and early childhood. Playwright Tina Howe (1977) dramatizes the intensity of the attachment between mother and son in a generally negative way in her early play *Birth and After Birth*. Howe, herself a mother of a son and a daughter, eschews the sentimentality of motherhood, saying: "As a mother, you experience moments of excruciating tenderness and love, but there is also a great savagery that has not been seen enough in the theatre and in movies...." (101). The first production of *Birth and After Birth* was in workshop in New York in 1974; the play has had limited production in the decades since, mostly because Howe guards it so closely. This play can be interpreted as a desire to recover the submerged maternal, to make visible the unseen non-phallic foundation that supports creativity in the son. This non-phallic foundation means that, in some cases, when we discuss mothers and sons, we may actually be discussing mothers and daughters.

John Bowlby (1973) suggests that in families in which a parent, usually the mother, keeps the child with her to meet her own unrequited needs for parental



Judy Martin, "October," Photographs, giftwrap, and cotton framed under glass, 24" x 29", 1986.

love, her action is a response to her mother who did not meet her needs. This mother, according to Bowlby, "treats the child as though he were a replica of her mother" (269). She seeks care and comfort from him, but may behave towards this child as though he were the dominant one. Is this why in Howe's play, *Birth and After Birth*, the playwright insists that the four-year-old son be played by an adult actor?²² Is this towering, dominant child emblematic of the mother's mother? (Howe explored this theme in her other plays, most notably in *Painting Churches* in which the mother is dominant over both her husband, who has Alzheimer's disease, and the adult daughter who struggles to assert her own identity as a woman and as an artist.) Some of the maternal features of this intergenerational tangle as outlined by Bowlby are: redirection toward the child of the resentment and anger at not receiving love, misinterpretation of the child's behavior as rejection of her; reproduction of the anger of her own mother in the behavior toward the child (270)—conditions that abound in Howe's play. The mother, Bowlby further notes, has "unexpressed resentment" (270). In certain cases, the mother can treat the child as an attachment figure (271).

The scene in *Birth After Birth* is Nicky's four-year-old birthday party. Nicky, as I have already said, is played by an adult. One of the underlying premises of the play is that for each birth there must be a corresponding death; in this case, the giant child is causing the mother's figurative death, since she has completely submerged her own life into that of her son. As the play opens, the audience sees that Sandy, the mother, has been up all night decorating the room and wrapping presents; Sandy is appropriately named since whenever she



Judy Martin, "October," Detail. Photographs, giftwrap, and cotton framed under glass, 24" x 29", 1986.

combs her hair or shakes her head, sand falls out, suggesting, of course, that she is turning into dust. "My head is leaking.... My brains are drying up..." she says at one point (Howe, 1977: 110). It also suggests regression, return to a more primitive state: return to the sea (or at least the beach), the womb, a place of calm, tranquillity, and no responsibilities: a place of absolute oneness and attachment with the mother, with Sandy's own mother. Sea metaphors abound in the play. Explaining the birth process to Nicky, she says that the newborn, upon experiencing air for the first time "turns bright pink! As pink as a seashell!" (Howe, 1977: 115). It becomes clear that Sandy herself yearns to be in a pre-Oedipal state with her mother. Sandy: "It's the strangest thing—ever since I got up this morning I've been smelling the sea. We're hundreds of miles away from it, but that bitter salty smell of low tide is unmistakable. I noticed it the moment I woke up..." (Howe, 1977: 124).

But what happens to the mother—Sandy in this case—after she gives birth? As her son is growing and developing, she no longer has him on her own terms, but rather on his. This is consuming her. There is a line that Sandy utters three times in the course of the two-act play: "When I looked into the mirror this morning, I saw an old lady. Not *old* old, just used up" (Howe, 1977: 109, 129, 168). Used up, Sandy doesn't have the strength to keep the attachment.

And the boy? His power is considerable. Now at age four, in the throes of working out in a permanent cultural way who he is, he no longer is in perfect relation to his mother. In his anger and confusion, he finds himself in

opposition to her, as he attempts to make all of his needs—from demands for grape juice to birthday presents—her needs too.

There seems to be no way out for women. That Nicky's development takes its toll on the parents, and particularly the mother, through incessant needs and demands, is clear. Sandy says to Nicky: "I just don't understand you. One minute you're the sweet baby Mommy brought home from the hospital, and the next, you're a savage!" (Howe, 1977: 118). Nicky is, as attachment theorist Margaret Mahler once put it, "hatching from the symbiotic shell," a development that poses no end of problems for the mother, who has given up *herself*, and has nothing left, now that her son is growing into himself, a self into which she unwillingly dissolves.

When Sandy's distant relatives, Mia and Jeffrey, who are childfree career anthropologists, join the party, the play displays more clearly the mother's need to maintain attachment to her son as a way of keeping her own mother and her own motherhood. Mia and Jeffrey study children of what they call "primitive" cultures, particularly the birth ritual of the Whan See tribe. The Whan See women assist at all births; when the child is born, they stuff the baby back into the womb, a process that is repeated nearly twenty times. Most babies die. Mia: "Seventeen times that baby came out of the womb and sixteen times he was pushed back in. The pain that girl bore was beyond description" (Howe, 1977: 166). This ritual highlights the desire of the mother to maintain connection—in this case, the absolute pre-birth attachment—to the child. In the Whan See culture—and in our culture—this attachment is violated the moment the child is born; then he becomes the property of the culture and its expectations. This runs counter to the mother's need for pure attachment. Defending the Whan See, anthropologist Jeffrey says: "When a civilized woman has a baby, she too is possessive, only in more subtle ways. She's possessive of her birth experience and delights in retelling it. She's possessive of her baby and tries to keep him helpless for as long as possible. Well, these Stone Age women were just acting out that same possessiveness by reinserting the baby into its mother's womb" (Howe, 1977: 167).

The fantastic Whan See women retain the power of attachment, although death, in this paradoxical situation, is the usual result. Later in the play, Sandy and Mia enact their own birth ritual. Their absurd, exclusionary ceremony is one that occurs without conception—without men—and ultimately without a child. Just as well, Howe seems to suggest. For Sandy has lost her son, anyway: he now belongs to the culture. Her grief drives her to her origins, to the symbiotic sea.

Now I turn from the mother's perspective of the Oedipal crisis to the son's so-called latency years. What happens to the mother here? Ann Petry's (1946) *The Street* is most often read as a naturalistic novel, a story of characters unable to overcome life's larger forces, forces that shape their fate. In this novel these forces include racism, sex, and money.

Lutie Johnson is a single African American woman trying to raise her

eight-year-old son, Bub, in a way that will enable him to move beyond the mean streets of Harlem. Lutie is determined to create a better life for Bub, indeed, a better life for them both, although many men, symbolic of the father in the Oedipal situation, try to intrude on this strong mother-son bond. Lutie rejects them all; her devotion is to her son, to that relationship, to the better future they will share some day. One thwarted suitor, Jones, who is the Superintendent of the apartment building in which they live, manages to enact revenge on Lutie. Jones manipulates Bub into stealing from mailboxes. After Bub is caught, Lutie must come up with lawyer fees. Another suitor, Boots Smith, arranges for Lutie to get the money. There's a catch, he tells her; she must sleep with his white boss. Lutie, of course, rejects this idea. Unfazed by her protests, Boots decides that he must possess her sexually himself, underscoring the money and sex link that pervades the novel. Lutie resists Boots's rape—an intrusion that also violates the sanctity of the pre-Oedipal bond she and Bub still share. In the struggle that follows, to her horror, she kills Boots. She then robs him; he has, she discovers, plenty of money: "He could have given her two hundred dollars and never missed it," she thinks bitterly (432). But Lutie suddenly realizes that she cannot use this for lawyer fees for Bub; a murderer now, she must use the money to escape. Thus, as in all Oedipal situations, the mother loses the son; indeed, in this case, the mother abandons him for her own good and, I suppose, for his, as well.

Lutie Johnson's failure to rescue neither her son nor herself evinces the pervasive power of patriarchy—and I mean patriarchy in its literal sense: of power transmitted through the father—in our culture. Lutie insists on taking the father's role as well as her own. She is prophetically warned by a woman vendor early in the novel: "It's best that the man do the work when the babies are young. And when the man is young. Not good for the woman to work when she's young. Not good for the man" (Petry, 1946: 33). Lutie's insistence on absorbing the man's role, and subsequently rejecting the man, is part of her attempt to keep a dyad and avoid the triangular pull of the father in the Oedipal situation, a situation that indelibly alters the mother's relationship with her son. However, masculinity rules the street; the street becomes the intrusive, vengeful father who struggles against Lutie's efforts to save Bub, to keep him within her power. Enraged that Bub is trying to earn money with a shoeshine kit in a box that Jones the Super helped him design, Lutie muses to herself: "And you're afraid that this street will keep him from finishing high school; that it may do worse than that and get him into some kind of trouble that will land him in reform school because you can't be home to look out for him because you have to work" (Petry, 1946: 67). The street is the patriarch come to claim Bub as its rightful heir. It is the street from which Bub must be rescued at all costs.

The street is the rival for Bub that she must defeat. The street's masculine appendages—personified in people like Jones, Boots Smith, Mrs. Hedges, and, above all, Junto, the white man who owns real estate and businesses in this part of Harlem—are ready to assert control of Lutie and possession of Bub at any

given moment. Lutie regards all of these personages with healthy suspicion, determining, rightly, that they want to dissolve her relationship with Bub. On Bub's quick friendship with Jones, Lutie muses: "She didn't exactly approve of this sudden friendship because the Super was—well, the kindest way to think of him was to call him peculiar" (Petry, 1946: 68)—thus associating a strangeness and the potential for estrangement with Jones. Lutie is determined to raise her son without masculine interference, raise him into a decent man, doing so all herself. As she looks at Bub, Lutie is

suddenly proud of him, glad that he was hers and filled with a strong determination to do a good job of bringing him up. The wave of self-confidence she had felt on the street came back again. She could do it, too—bring him up so that he would be a fine, strong man. (Petry, 1946: 72)

But there's so much to work against. Is it a coincidence that the Super's dog—a dog we are to think of literally as a dog from hell—is named "Buddy"—an anagram of the name "Bub"?: "Then the Super would say, 'Buddy!' and the dog would come back to lie down close beside the man" (Petry, 1946: 75)—does this represent his taking of Bub? And what match can Lutie be for the phallic-dominated universe in which she finds herself? Even she is aware of what she lacks; on a free night, she finds herself going to the Junto Bar and Grill—the bar Junto owns—to have a beer "so that she could for a moment capture the illusion of having some of the things that she lacked" (Petry, 1946: 144).

In Petry's (1946) novel money and sex, moreover, are always equated, as this passage about Min, who lives with Jones, demonstrates: "Big Boy, her last husband before Jones, would snatch and tear it [money] from her stocking, reach hard clutching hands inside her dresses in his eagerness to get at it" (Petry, 1946: 116). Lutie acknowledges repeatedly that money "was the only thing that could get her and Bub out of that street" (Petry, 1946: 166). The sexual-financial tension concerns who will possess Bub. Moreover, Lutie knows: "All the responsibility for Bub was hers. It was up to her to keep him safe, to get him out of here so he would have a chance to grow up fine and strong. Because this street and the other streets just like it would, if he stayed in them long enough, do something terrible to him. Sooner or later they would do something equally as terrible to her. And as she sat there in the dark, she began to think about the things that she had seen on such streets as this one she lived in" (194).

Of course, she blames herself when things go badly: "It was her fault he'd got into this trouble. No matter how she looked at it, it was still her fault. It was always the mother's fault when a kid got into trouble, because it meant she'd failed the kid somewhere. She had wanted him to grow up fine and strong and she'd failed him all the way along the line" (Petry, 1946: 405). Lutie accuses the street of "playing nursemaid" to her kid while she worked, but the mechanism more closely represents the father's assertion of his power over the mother and

the child: "The street ... became both mother and father and trained your kid for you, and it was an evil father and a vicious mother, and, of course, you helped the street along by talking to [Bub] about money" (Petry, 1946: 407). Lutie is conscious of a desire to kill Junto because of what he represents: the irrevocable loss of her son: "It is as though [Junto] were a piece of that dirty street itself, tangible, close at hand, within reach" (Petry, 1946: 422). And killing the street, removing the father, would preserve the relationship with Bub.

But how do you kill a street? Can't be done. But the alternative? The only way to resolve the dispute over power and control is to remove the mother. Leaving her son forever, "Lutie found a seat midway in the coach. She sat down near the window. Bub would never understand why she had disappeared. He was expecting to see her tomorrow. She had promised she would come. He would never know why she had deserted him and he would be bewildered and lost without her" (Petry, 1946: 435). Bub, of course, will continue to wish for her, for her presence. Lutie draws a "series of circles" on the train window as she moves away: the undifferentiated circle that she had once envisioned with her husband Jim, Bub, and herself and later between Bub and her: this symbiotic circle has exploded into the Oedipal triangle of Lutie, Bub, and the street, with the street finally asserting its power. Lutie has lost her son; Bub has lost his mother. The only mutuality here is mutual grief at their permanent separation.

Perhaps Bub will keep his mother's memory alive. The creativity of memory, memory re-inscribed, keeps the essence of the maternal figure alive despite its omnipresent association with death. And what of this deadly association? Sarah Kofman's reading of Freud asserts that this connection is owing to the mother's lesson about the bargain struck at birth with the son, namely, that the conditional gift of life has to be paid back, in time, with death (Kofman, 1985: 75). However, the struggle lessens over time; what emerges is the need to acknowledge the primary attachment between mothers and sons, and the need to repair the deep and primal grief.

In her essay "Late Theory, Late Style" Kathleen Woodward (1991) discusses the change in Freud's late work, a change that involved seeing the source of anxiety not as a fear of castration but rather as longing, mourning: the missing of a loved one. His thinking involved a return to his mother, "the great missing figure of Freud's work over his long life" (Woodward, 1991: 87). This mother figure—who represents "the dawning psyche's first and everlastingly internalized encounter" as Updike (1984: 441) has said—opened a way for Freud to re-think his earlier theories. How did Freud highlight the figure of the mother—his own mother, particularly—over the life course? Freud (1953) wrote in "The Theme of the Three Caskets" of:

the three inevitable relations that a man has with a woman—the woman who bears him, the woman who is his mate and the woman who destroys him; or ... the three forms taken by the figure of the mother in the course of a man's life—the mother herself, the beloved

one who is chosen after her pattern, and lastly the Mother Earth who receives him once more. (1953: 301)

Reading this text, Sarah Kofman remarks that:

Freud gives back to his mother what he has borrowed from her; this text is a debt of gratitude to her In one sense he gives up his own life here so as to "save" the Mother, to her leave her in the position of primacy. The tribute consists in fact in the eternal wisdom he draws from his analysis (in particular that of *King Lear*), namely: that one must renounce love, choose death, come to terms with the need to die; it is precisely this wisdom that his mother taught him ... and the text delates it to be a simple return to the wisdom of the *original myth*.... (1985: 75-76)

It is this natural order expressed in myth that science and psychoanalysis merely formalize. Freud accepted this natural order, and could not abide any tampering with it. For example, he could not bear the thought of dying earlier than his mother; the death of his daughter, and, especially, the death of his grandson were unbearably absurd deaths. That Freud's mother died before him came as a relief, as Woodward (1991) has noted, and granted him freedom to die. Thus, the mother-son relationship is associated with death in a way that the mother-daughter relationship is not; the daughter, as Chodorow implied, is charged with carrying on life, while the son separates from the mother in order to better perceive her lessons of death and the particular conditions involved in returning to her.

Another related idea growing out of the missing mother in psychoanalysis has to do with the metaphoric description of the mother-son life course relationship. Woodward notes that throughout his productive life Freud "continued ... to build his life in theory" (1953: 89). Traditional Western literary criticism has held that the journey in life is the movement from illusion to disillusion. I propose, however, that the life course, broadly considered, is a movement instead from illusion to re-illusionment, and that this is accomplished through a movement from the experiential to the theoretical. In this, it seems to me, mothers and sons must acknowledge their basic attachment as the source of their desires and their creativity. As Jane Lazarre's (1991) narrator, who is the mother of two sons, puts it in the novel *Worlds Beyond My Control*: "Two stories converge in my life, one about motherhood, the other about writing ... " (130).

With these ideas in mind, I turn to Flannery O'Connor's (1992) "Everything That Rises Must Converge." Here the inversion—that is, the caretaker role reversal—and the oneness are shown in powerful, yet explicit ways. Although Julian must see that certain of his mother's needs are met—he must help her get to where she needs to go, whether driven by bus or by psychic

energy—their life views are on opposite sides of convention. Julian, a college-educated aspiring writer, lives at home with his aging mother whose southern genteel ways he regards as unenlightened and hopelessly old-fashioned. Julian resents her verve and flamboyance; he is annoyed that her “sky-blue” eyes “were as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten” (O’Connor, 1992: 192), while “he was as disenchanting with [life] as a man of fifty” (O’Connor, 1992: 197). His mother is secure in some larger cosmic identity, and says: “If you know who you are, you can go anywhere” (O’Connor, 1992: 193), to which Julian responds: “Knowing who you are is good for one generation only” (O’Connor, 1992: 194). Apparently, in the style of the American male, he intends to keep reinventing himself. The mother brags that Julian is a writer, though the reader knows the depths of his failure at this profession.

Yet the mother thinks warmly of him. Why? Studies suggest that, as sociologists Marcene Goodman and Robert L. Rubinstein (1996) say, “from the mother’s perspective, the emotional content and the meaning of the mother/child relationship appear to remain unchanged over time” (295). Julian’s mother has built up an inflated image of her son, but this has, in sociological parlance, several adaptive functions. Called by Goodman and Rubinstein an “adaptive illusion,” it is the means by which, “in supplying a ‘happy ending’ to the child’s life, the [mother] could take comfort in knowing that [her life] had been of some value, or had ‘paid off.’ Further, believing in [her] child’s security helped [her] to alleviate anxiety over [her] own.” This enables the mother to put “satisfactory closure on life” (Goodman and Rubinstein, 1996: 296). Without such an adaptive illusion, Julian’s mother would no doubt lapse into despair. Indeed, Goodman and Rubinstein “contend that elderly mothers’ illusion of cohesion and centrality in their only child’s life are critical to maintaining their sense of identity into later life” (Goodman and Rubinstein, 1996: 298). The mother in O’Connor’s (1992) story keeps her son close to her through her own illusion. This imaginary recreation enables the mother to recover and reclaim Julian, completing the maternal life cycle.

Julian, of course, believes he has a much different task, the task of individuation. He thinks that he must escape his mother’s illusions; he desires to “evade and deny the cohesiveness” (Goodman and Rubinstein, 1996: 297). Sociologists tell us also that Julian longs to bypass the relationship he has with his mother in order to create himself. He mistakenly thinks himself emotionally engulfed by his mother, when the two of them are divided in false and unsatisfactory ways. When she talks of the fences that separate, Julian believes his mother is talking in support of racial segregation; however, it is actually a generational fence that is at the heart of the story. This fence—this separation of mother and son—must break down. And it does. His mother is physically attacked by an African American mother, an attack she has innocently provoked. This precipitates her stroke and Julian finds himself “looking into a face he had never seen before” (Goodman and Rubinstein, 1996: 203).

Alarmed, he sees that a “tide of darkness seemed to be sweeping her from him” (Goodman and Rubinstein, 1996: 204), and the primacy of their bond returns to him as he cries out to her and then cries out for help in recovering the mother he is about to lose. The final sentence of the story is: “The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow” (Goodman and Rubinstein, 1996: 204).

Julian is shocked by his emotions, for wasn’t his mother attached to him, while he struggled to be free? And isn’t this the usual situation with an aging mother and an adult son? For the aged mother, the child becomes the attachment figure, the person whom the mother needs. These are, in Bowlby’s (1973) phrase, “anxious attachments”—displaced yearnings whose characteristics are difficult to accept. Inverted needs, whenever they appear, bear, in Herbert Blau’s (1986) words, the “unexpected virulence of the return of the repressed” (19)—in this case, for both mother and son.

Women, in both life and literature, as one might expect, experience the mother-son relationship as an important and recognizably distinct part of their lives; motherhood and creativity form a synergy. As Lazarre (1991) writes, this relationship is a story “about the closeness of a mother and a son, a story implying that no matter how separate they must learn to be, they are still—well, *one* in a way, different yet the same” (83). Toni Morrison (qtd. in Moyer and Bucher, 1994: 2) too, has implied that having two sons influenced her work;³ she maintains that her writing and her mothering are the two elements of her life she could not possibly do without (Dreifus, 1994: 75). In a mother’s very old age the creativity can overcome the loss and recover—indeed, reclaim—the child.

And so I come to the final story in my literary life course: Eudora Welty’s (1992) venerable story about a black woman, “A Worn Path.”⁴ This story, first published in 1941, is about an old woman—Phoenix Jackson—is at least in her 90s, perhaps in her 100s—who is making her annual trek into Natchez to get medicine for her grandson. Phoenix—her very name suggests revival—renews herself by holding before her the image of her grandson, a grandson who may no longer in fact be alive; her fantasy of his life and his need for her “soothing medicine” are what sustain her in her very old age. She tells the nurse at the clinic that “[h]e wear a little patch quilt and peep out holding his mouth open like a little bird” (Welty, 1992: 15). This is fiction; given Phoenix’s age, this grandson is probably in his forties, or even older. Or perhaps it’s not her grandson as a small boy she recalls at all, but rather her own son; since Phoenix reinvents herself, she can reinvent others. She loves artifice, and her tools for creating it are her memory and the reinterpretation of actual events. She can collapse generations and time if she wishes. She can make her grandson or son dependent on her if she wishes. She subverts reality as she pleases. In the process, Phoenix challenges our own worn paths—the worn paths of our thinking about age and relationship to one’s children. For Phoenix, it may be

that the best children are the ones she has in theory. As creator and theoretician, Phoenix is the one who matters. Often asked whether the grandson was alive, Welty famously replied: "*Phoenix* is alive."

Life exists for Phoenix only as she can invent it through language and image; she re-creates life, sets it in motion, as in the scene with the dogs and the hunter. A dog comes seemingly out of nowhere, and when she raises her cane at him, she falls. A young white hunter with his own dog comes along and helps her out. The hunter condescends to her on the basis of her age and her race. He has a too easy familiarity: he has the power to name, and so calls her "Granny," but this is not a grandson Phoenix would ever trouble over. She reveals little about who she is, but she subverts his power by setting another story in motion: she manipulates the hunter into sicing his dog on the big black dog that knocked her down, and, in the bargain, secretly claims a nickel that falls from the hunter's pocket.

She puts any number of events in motion with a creator's zest. Ostensibly on a journey to get medicine, Phoenix subverts the ideal of the self-sacrificing traditional mother. Once in Natchez, she asks a white woman burdened with Christmas presents to tie her shoe, presumably, just to see what will happen. (The woman ties Phoenix's shoe.) Phoenix's words, her illusions, her theories—in short, her possession of her grandson/son within herself—are alive. By keeping her creativity/procreativity—in a way that echoes Sandy's and Mia's childfree childbirth ritual—she keeps her subjectivity and recovers her son.

The bargain that Sarah Kofman (1985) posits in her interpretation of Freud—the conditional life that the mother gives must someday be replaced with death—has been reversed with Phoenix's insistence on her attachment to her grandson or son. Phoenix cannot face the death of her grandson; she cannot bear eternal separation. Freud made creative uses of his grief in old age; Phoenix, too, reconstitutes her grief into a new story that enlivens the worn path. Phoenix gets sustenance *from* (and, curiously, not *for*) her son/grandson: from an invented theoretical construction of him. Nor is Phoenix enslaved by the natural order of life and death; she builds on the possibility of death to create literary life and an association of the mother with life, not death. Phoenix retains the attachment to her son and uses that attachment, or rather her disengagement from it, as a rich source for her own continuing life story, a story that she reinvents minute to minute. She engages in a process not of disillusion, but of re-illusionment: a re-illusionment that sustains both her and us. The ties of the mother and the son are not broken, even with the loss of the son/grandson; and, thanks to Phoenix's (and Welty's) creative gifts, neither is our tie to Phoenix, although Phoenix, too, would be "dead" by now.

In Welty's (1992) story, no one gives up the other; there is no separation. Rather, the other is continually recovered, and life is rejuvenated. Indeed, all of these fabulists—Howe (1977, 1984), Petry (1946), O'Connor (1992) and Welty (1978, 1992, 1993)—lament the cultural insistence on the separation of mother and son. Creativity, as Phoenix Jackson shows, can just as easily emerge

from mother and son bonding as it can from the myth of separation for individuation. Division, separation, conflict: that particular cultural plot valorizes the male as the solution to the son's incest dilemma. But the mother's holding of her son's emotions and the son's eventual holding of the mother's—the life-course portrayal in Munsch's (1991) *Love You Forever* with which I began—generates closeness. What's more, the energy of the bond radiates creativity. As we've just seen, Phoenix Jackson presents us with a kind of literary generativity—to borrow Erik Erikson's (1964) term—as she builds upon the mother-son (grandson) relationship. She gives us some soothing medicine to heal the wounds of the sons we never should have lost.

¹These titles are: Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Adele Marie Barker, *The Mother Syndrome in the Russian Folk Imagination* (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1986); W. Eugene Davis, *The Celebrated Case of Esther Waters: the Collaboration of George Moore and Barrett H. Clark on "Esther Waters: a Play"* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984); Kerry Driscoll, *William Carlos Williams and the Maternal Muse* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987); Joyce Elaine King, *Black Mothers to Sons: Juxtaposing African American Literature with Social Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); Janet Perkins, *The Feminine in the Poetry of Herbert to Helder* (London: Tamesis, 1977); Margaret Storch, *Sons and Adversaries: Women in William Blake and D. H. Lawrence* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990).

²Similarly, Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, editors of *Representations of Motherhood*, begin their Introduction with a discussion of a 1940s photograph in which “[a] tiny mother, shrunk, strapped, and held captive in an infant swing, looks up at her massive toddler. The imposing toddler—*clearly a boy*—towers over her, arms folded, leaning on the wall as if he were in control of the space and master of her life” [emphasis added] (1994: 1).

³Toni Morrison said: “There was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother. For me it was the most liberating thing that ever happened.... Liberating because the demands that children make are not the demands of a normal “other.” The children’s demands on me were things that nobody else had ever asked me to do. To be a good manager. To have a sense of humor. To deliver something that somebody else could use. And they were not interested in all the things that other people were interested in, like what I was wearing or if I were sensual. Somehow all of the baggage that I had accumulated as a person about what was valuable just fell away. I could not only be me—whatever that was—but somebody actually needed me to be that” (qtd. in Moyers and Tucher, 1994: 2).

⁴I owe a huge scholarly debt in this section to Elaine Orr's (1992) “Unsettling

Every Definition of Otherness': Another Reading of Eudora Welty's 'A Worn Path.'"

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