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“I’ve Been Given the Wrong Mother:” Reconsidering Absent Mothers in Postmodern British

Literature

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A thesis

presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

Amanda G. Sawyers

December 2018

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Keywords: *Atonement*, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, *Waterland*, absent mothers, dysfunctional mothers, psychoanalytic theory, Postmodern British literature, tropes

## ABSTRACT

### “I’ve Been Given the Wrong Mother:” Reconsidering Absent Mothers in Postmodern British Literature

by

Amanda G. Sawyers

Nineteenth-century British authors, in particular, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, and Jane Austen, often turned to orphaned children as a means to drive the plot of their novels. While struggles such as displacement were often accurately depicted, the abovementioned authors and their contemporaries often glossed over or completely disregarded the trauma and psychological implications felt by these orphans. As psychology gained prominence as a discipline through the works of Sigmund Freud and others, modern British literature saw a shift in its consideration of orphans and, additionally, emotionally absent mothers. This thesis will examine three modern British novels; Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, Kate Atkinson’s *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, and Graham Swift’s *Waterland* with respect to their exploration of the psychological and possible traumatic impact of their protagonists lives in a variety of disrupted family dynamics.

## DEDICATIONS

To my husband, Daniel, for supporting my passion, keeping me on track, and forcing me to take those much-needed academic breaks. You are my best friend and biggest supporter and I thank you for always being in my corner.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
DEDICATIONS.....	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	4
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	6
2. ORIGINS OF THE ABSENT MOTHER TROPE.....	11
3. ATONEMENT.....	25
4. BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE MUSEUM.....	38
5. WATERLAND.....	47
6. CONCLUSION.....	57
WORKS CITED.....	61
VITA.....	65

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout Britain's expansive literary canon, many recurring motifs have prevailed and changed with the passing of years. Such tropes have defined each literary movement and continue to evolve as emerging novelists look to leave their mark. One such predominate trope present within British fiction is the absent mother. From literature to film and even children's television, the absent mother trope is difficult to escape. The trope has seen many incarnations but has always remained eponymous. Whether absent before the events of the novel or shortly after its opening, the mother is characteristically missing from the plot and story's development and her absence is either dealt with directly or rarely mentioned. This absence is typically attributed to tragic circumstances—most often death by childbirth or sudden illness.

At the heart of the absent mother trope is a young hero or heroine, often left to face the harsh challenges of life on the streets or the realities of an adult world without the guidance of their mother. Typically, these young protagonists are either orphaned or left under the care of an abusive or neglectful relative. It is here where these narratives frequently commence. Readers are captivated by what these young heroes and heroines are left to endure and their general naivety in the face of evil and adversity. Furthermore, readers greet these narratives with a sense of "protagonist prosperity." No one wants to see these young heroes and heroines fail against odds so cruelly dealt.

Literary tropes, like the absent mother, are often viewed as formulaic, overused, or even clichéd. Since its establishment in the 18th-century and widespread adoption in the 19th-century, the absent mother trope has retained both its literary and cultural relevance through Modern and Postmodern re-imaginings. It is through this evolution that the absent mother trope has evolved

from a mean of exploring gender and societal issues to a method of studying development and dysfunction within modern families. The trope is now deeply woven into storytelling fabrics, and its presence within the DNA of the British novel has allowed Postmodern novelists like Ian McEwan, Kate Atkinson, and Graham Swift to exploit this classic trope in idiosyncratic ways.

Evidence of the absent mother trope as a plot device predates the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. It was perhaps most frequently and famously employed in the Gothic literature of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup>-centuries. The world of Gothic literature was a dangerous one for women of all stations; however, it is the mothers in these novels who are often in the greatest danger (Anolik 25). The mothers of heroines created by Gothic authors like Matthew Lewis and Anne Radcliffe regularly met horrific endings prior to the events of the novel. Conversely, 19<sup>th</sup>-century novelists like Jane Austen and Charlotte Brönte often turned to the absent mother trope to challenge the “separate spheres” of Regency and Victorian society. During this time, women were expected to occupy a role of complete submission and domesticity. Writing during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century was viewed as a man’s craft. In their seminal text, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar trace the dominant presence of the absent mother trope in 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature within fiction produced by female writers, to an “anxiety of authorship.” These early novelists were not only carving out a place for themselves, but they were also combating how their male precursors read her which was often that she could or ought not to write at all (Gilbert and Gubar 49). Some of these novels by female writers, like Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, shift from this to an examination and critique of childhood, mainly female, development.

One aspect rarely explored within nineteenth-century novels is the mental state of those characters lacking one or both parents. Psychology's earliest roots trace back to ancient Greece, yet it would not emerge as a studied discipline until the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century. In its infancy,



psychology primarily explored the conscious human experience. Freud's work would show that much of the psyche's nurturing occurs during early childhood through parental guidance and support. With his work currently unpublished, it is easy to accept why authors like Bronte and Dickens did not incorporate theories relating to stunted psychological development and trauma when creating their characters. However, Jane Austen does begin to touch on the potential psychological trauma that comes from having an absent mother, and in this, she prefigures the Postmodern authors who follow. This trauma is nowhere more apparent than with Catherine Morland's "heroine training" in *Northanger Abbey*.

With modernist greats like Virginia Woolf, there is a shift to a more sentimental view of mothers. Having lost her own at age thirteen, Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse* as a means coming to terms with the loss. The mother of *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsey, "embodies the mythical universal mother" and establishes unity (Kavaloski 135). Woolf could have easily continued in the tradition of her predecessors and explored growth without a strong maternal figure; however, she relied more on channeling inner pain and experience. Postmodern authors like McEwan, Atkinson, and Swift, have continued this trauma-driven approach, but with stark exceptions. McEwan and Atkinson use historiographical metafiction, or fiction that combines both historical fiction and metafiction, to exploit the trope and discuss the prevalence of "emotionally" absent mothers. Swift's narrative echoes the framework of the Gothic absent mother but further disrupts this trope by placing Mary Metcalf in danger with psychological ramifications.

Throughout this thesis, I will provide a detailed analysis of how each of the above mentioned Postmodern authors reimagines the absent mother trope. In Chapter One, I will begin with a definition and trace the evolution of the absent mother trope. Chapter Two will look at its place with the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century canon with particular attention paid to Gothicism and

*Northanger Abbey*. *Northanger Abbey*, while commonly viewed as satire, provides readers with one of the earliest subversions of the absent mother trope. Mothers have a less significant role than the heroines in the novels of Jane Austen, and *Northanger Abbey* shows how character development, or in Catherine's case "heroine training," can be achieved without a strong maternal presence.

Additionally, *Northanger Abbey* will play a significant role in Chapter Three. Ian McEwan referred to his 2001 award-winning text, *Atonement*, as his "Jane Austen novel." From its borrowed epigraph, *Atonement* shares with its 19<sup>th</sup>-century predecessor a common theme of misunderstanding. McEwan's adolescent protagonist, Briony Tallis, like Austen's heroine, has an unhealthy preoccupation with fiction. While Briony's mother Emily Tallis is alive and dotes on her daughter's writing talent, she is otherwise uninvolved in her development. I will explore how this leaves Briony unable to comprehend the severity of the adult situations she desperately longs to write about, thus leading to the subsequent theme of McEwan's work—atonement.

In Chapter Four, I examine a similar variation on the emotionally absent mother presented by McEwan. Kate Atkinson's *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* intertwines the life and family history of Ruby Lennox with that of her Yorkshire ancestors. At the heart of the novel is Ruby's dysfunctional relationship with her mother, Bunty Lennox. Briony's identity is consumed by her juvenilia, and Ruby's agency is complicated by her dissatisfaction with Bunty as a mother and by a terrible family secret. Through analysis of fairy tale imagery and a discussion of Freud's family romance complex, I show how Ruby attempts to resolve supposed error in the distribution of mother figures.

In Chapter Five, through a discussion of Graham Swift's *Waterland*, I look at an adaptation of the Gothicism interpretation of the absent mother trope. Mary's mother is missing

from the beginning of Swift's novel; however, her identity is molded by a personal, patriarchal society comprised of her father and her young boyfriend (and later husband), Tom. When attempts to discover herself and her sexuality then leave her barren, she steps into the role of monstrous other. This chapter will show how Mary's identity is tied closely to Tom's romanticized ideal mother who died while he was very young. Unfortunately for Mary, it is a goal that she stood little chance of achieving.

Present throughout these three Postmodern novels is characters uncertain of their identities and how their ineffective mothers severely compromise their development from adolescence to adulthood. The lack of a mother is often the driving force behind the novel's narrative. Intentionally or not, what follows on the pages is usually the protagonist reacting to and attempting to understand both the loss and process the grief and related complicated feelings. Additionally, each marred by both individual and family tragedies and readers are left to follow along as they navigate these difficult situations without a proper support system. This thesis connects the works of McEwan, Atkinson, and Swift on this shared theme as I share their unique contributions to the absent mother trope.

## CHAPTER 2

### ORIGINS OF THE ABSENT MOTHER TROPE

In the span of a century, England's population nearly doubled in size. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, the population was roughly five million people. By 1801, it sat at almost nine million. With industrialism on the rise, many migrated from the countryside and rural areas of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales in search of new job opportunities in newly developing towns and cities ("The Rise of Cities in the 18<sup>th</sup>-Century"). Many experienced both culture and sensory shock from the change of scenery. Through this cultural expansion came the desire to learn about both the new and the unsavory aspects of growing urban landscape. Libraries began to grow, and as education saw reforms, a new reading public emerged. More middle-class citizens were reading than ever before, and women writers began to see more representation. Many novelists would later draw inspiration from the cities they now called home and wrote about their day-to-day encounters along with other matters once foreign to them—like crime and orphaned or abandoned children. Through this, there was a rise in novelists employing the absent mother trope during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century.

One of its earliest appearances in the British literary canon came in 1722 with Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. Born to an incarcerated convict mother, Moll is separated from her mother shortly after birth. From there, the novel chronicles the hardships of Moll's life. While fraught with a variety of complications including multiple husbands and a near death sentence, Moll ends her days affluent and apologetic for crimes committed during the more difficult parts of her life. Another notable variation on this desire for protagonist prosperity came with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* in 1740. The epistolary narrative depicts the trials of the teenaged titular character as she attempts to remain virtuous in spite of temptation. The only presence of

Pamela's mother is through the letters she writes home. Throughout the novel, she endures sexual harassment at the hands of her employer and is even imprisoned at one point when all she wants is to return home to her parents. In the end, much to the dismay of many modern readers, Pamela marries her would-be assailant and lives happily ever after. Both novels present aspects of society once foreign to others while additionally building upon the idea of protagonist prosperity common to the absent mother trope. Both Moll and Pamela deal with some less than favorable odds throughout their narratives without the care and support of their mothers.

However, the absent mother trope was perhaps most frequently employed in Gothic literature. The world of Gothic literature was dangerous for women of all stations as threats of imprisonment, forced marriage, and rape often lurked around every corner. However, mothers in these novels who are subject to a unique danger (Anolik 25). The mothers created by Lewis, Radcliffe, and others are often dead before the events of the novel, or they meet a horrific end within the novel's pages solely to promote horror and sensationalism. The danger and psychological trauma that these daughters endure is imperative to the core of Gothicism. If the mothers were present to guide and protect their daughters from their evil male relatives and other typical Gothic dangers, there would not be a story to tell. While these novels adapted the absent mother trope as a means to shock and excite audiences, other authors began to experiment with it as a means to discuss and examine the impact a mother's absence would have on the development of young female protagonists. More common with emerging female novelists, one of the earliest to accomplish this was Jane Austen.

Published shortly after her death in 1817, Austen's *Northanger Abbey* managed to exceed the expectations of Britain's late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century female fiction writers. Prior to *Northanger Abbey's* release, popular fiction from female authors fell into one of three

categories—educational, sentimental, and Gothic. *Northanger Abbey* borrows from all three while additionally critiquing and satirizing traditional views associated with nineteenth-century England (Mekler 24). The novel's heroine, Catherine Morland, is preoccupied with the sensational works of Gothic greats like Anne Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis. Throughout *Northanger Abbey*, she is plagued with misunderstandings sparked by her overactive imagination and diet of Gothic literature. Each awkward encounter is only exacerbated by Catherine's lack of a strong maternal figure during the novel. While later nineteenth-century authors like Charles Dickens would experiment with the absent mother trope, Austen would be one of the century's earliest to deconstruct its narrative.

*Northanger Abbey* has a problematic cast acting as surrogate mother figures to the young Catherine Morland. In fact, Austen notes that the exceptional health of Catherine's mother, Mrs. Morland, is perhaps viewed as a significant obstacle to her questionable goal of becoming a heroine in a novel:

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard—and he had never been handsome. He had a considerable independence, besides two good livings—and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters. Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. (Austen 3)

Since Mrs. Morland is present only at the beginning and end of the novel, Catherine's development, or heroine training, is left to surrogate mother figures. Most of these, like

Catherine's chaperone Mrs. Allen, while present in her life, offer little regarding emotional support and only show her how to conduct herself publicly.

Throughout the entirety of *Northanger Abbey*, Mrs. Tilney, Henry and Eleanor's mother, is the only *traditional* absent mother present. While her passing occurs some time before the events of the novel, the Tilney children are not orphaned or left to endure life's hardships alone. Their father, General Tilney, while leading with an authoritarian fist, is a formidable presence in the lives of his children. During her stay with the Tilney family at Northanger Abbey, General Tilney is at the heart of her Gothic preoccupation which would lead to the subsequent misunderstanding with Henry:

Catherine's blood ran cold with the horrid suggestions which naturally spring from these words. Could it be possible?—Could Henry's father?—And yet how many were the examples to justify even the blackest suspicions!—And, when she saw him in the evening, while she worked with her friend, slowly pacing the drawing-room for an hour together in silent thoughtfulness, with downcast eyes and contracted brow, she felt secure from all possibility of wronging him. (Austen 155).

Both Henry and Eleanor are forthcoming in providing Catherine with the details regarding their mother's death. While devoted to her ten children, little had happened in her upbringing for Mrs. Morland to prepare Catherine for such interactions. Moreover, Mrs. Allen offered her little interpersonal advice to draw from. With her overactive imagination left unchecked (and initially encouraged by Henry), Catherine turned to her love of Gothic literature as a means of understanding the Tilney family.

While *Northanger Abbey* predates the notion of separate spheres that would later dominate Victorian society, a mother's position in society was still a domestic one. As famously

described in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a woman's education was meant to groom her to be pleasing to men at all times. Once ensuring herself a husband, her only remaining focus is that of her family. Even with ten children, Mrs. Morland should have been aware of her daughter's preoccupation with sensational Gothic literature. However, many scholars have discussed Austen's ambivalent relationship with mothers.

Considering many of her novels follow the trials of a young heroine, mothers have a less dominant presence in Austen's work. As Jessica Horn notes in her thesis, "Maternal Misogyny: Absent Mothers in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Fiction," the relationships between mothers and daughters were unimportant to the women of nineteenth-century fiction due to the aid they receive from other strong, supportive women (Horn 41-2). Through this logic, Catherine's growth and support would be more nurtured through a close circle of friends than by her mother. Her encounters with other women close in age would provide her with a model for her behavior thus aiding in her own agency.

However, her encounters with her chaperone, Mrs. Allen, and later with Isabella Thorpe are far from supportive or nurturing. While vacationing in Bath, Catherine is left under the care of Mrs. Allen and her ailing husband. Both are described as kind-hearted individuals, however, they never had children of their own. Mrs. Allen only appeals to Catherine on a superficial level as Austen states early in the text that "dress was her passion" (Austen 10). Additionally, after a societal *faux pas*, readers learn that Mrs. Allen has no desire to provide Catherine with guidance as "young people do not like to always be thwarted" (Austen 84). Austen uses Mr. Allen to correct Catherine's indiscretion when she travels out in a carriage unescorted with Isabella Thorpe. While Mr. Allen is unable to participate in the public sphere due to his illness, he is still stepping outside of his Victorian societal role by providing Catherine with the guidance his wife



has failed to provide. It is through this action that Austen is not only critiquing England's strict gender division, but she is also one of the earliest novelists to experiment with subverting the absent mother trope.

In their well-known feminist examination of Victorian literature, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe Isabella Thorpe as "heroine with a vengeance." She is flirty and feigning and chases men with a single-minded determination (Gilbert and Gubar 129). While women during the nineteenth-century sought to achieve a spiritual domestic life, being too forward was characteristic of a worrying sexual appetite. In contrast to Isabella's character, women were to "appear as though you do not [want to marry]; but mind you do it sweetly." Because, after all, "nothing is so fatal as a ticket stuck in a hat, on which written: 'I want to marry, mother says I ought and must; and I myself believe I really should do so, for more reasons than one'" (qtd. in Sanghani). Isabella can be viewed as the very antithesis of her more naïve counterpart. Additionally, Isabella encourages Catherine's consumption of Gothic literature while encouraging behavior in the young heroine that could be viewed as promiscuous. As previously discussed, Catherine's association with someone behaving in such a manner could lead to an unwarranted reputation. While not directly guilty of impropriety unbecoming of her social sphere, her friendship with Isabella could easily lead to trouble.

Austen, however, is cleverly ambiguous when it comes to Isabella's chastity. She uses her actions before and after her broken relationship with Catherine's brother, James, to provide readers insight into her real character. After what Isabella viewed as a disappointing response by Mr. and Mrs. Morland regarding her engagement to James and the money to be given, Isabella turns her attention to Captain Tilney, eldest brother to Henry and Eleanor. While no impropriety

is documented, the fact that she would return his advances while still being engaged is, in itself, questionable. Interestingly enough, Isabella makes the statement to Catherine that she knows “the fickle sex too well” (Austen 181). Nothing more is ever stated by Austen. To what extent does Isabella “know” the opposite sex? The ambiguity of the comment is left up for interpretation. However, much can be read into it. For example, in the 2007 film adaptation directed by Jon Jones, Isabella and Captain Tilney consummate their relationship. Isabella is dismissed shortly after, giving in to Captain Tilney’s playboy ways (*Northanger Abbey*). As Catherine eventually grows and discovers her own femininity, she rightfully cuts ties with Isabella. Through unfortunate experiences that could have been avoided by better advice from her surrogate mother, Mrs. Allen, she is finally able to realize that this friendship will cause further harm the longer it is allowed to continue.

One of the predominant themes within the narrative of *Northanger Abbey* is Catherine’s “heroine training.” While Austen’s argument within the plot is that young women should not be trained to be heroines, one assumption would be that this role would fall to her mother. As discussed earlier, her role in *Northanger Abbey* is significant albeit short. In addition to seeing little harm with her daughter’s preoccupation with Gothic fiction, she mistakes what is heartache for Catherine longing for her time in Bath:

My dear Catherine, I am afraid you are growing quite a fine lady. I do not know when poor Richard’s cravats would be done, if he had no friend buy you. Your head runs too much upon Bath; but there is a time for everything—a time for balls and plays, and a time for work. You have had a long run of amusement, and now you must try to be useful.

(Austen 202)

Mrs. Morland is unable to fully comprehend what her daughter went through while in Bath and at Northanger Abbey. Instead of addressing the matter directly, she provides Catherine with an essay written about young girls who have been spoiled by homes of wealthy acquaintances (Austen 203). It is possible that through Mrs. Morland's inability to see her eldest as a heroine, she has overlooked the obvious—Catherine is lovesick. While Mrs. Morland was not as problematic as her chaperone or even the equally feigning Mrs. Thorpe, but Catherine did not have her mother to rely on at this critical point in her life.

Without the guidance of her mother, Catherine is forced to rely upon her circle of friends. When Isabella, and by extension her brother's and mother's, plot comes to light, Catherine's relationship with Eleanor is fully realized. While Eleanor lacks an ally in the absence of her mother, this does not stop her from being one to Catherine (Horn 44). Additionally, Eleanor is often responsible for roles that would have been best suited for Mrs. Tilney. When General Tilney learns that Catherine is not as wealthy as previously believed, he leaves the unpleasant task of dismissing her to Eleanor. Without her own mother as a guide, Eleanor can act as one to Catherine by providing both emotional support and moved for her unexpected journey home. Austen's inclusion of this supportive friendship contrasts the selfish and immature one Catherine shared with Isabella during her time in Bath. Through her satirical take on the popular Gothic novels of the century, Austen was equally successful in providing an early examination of the various dynamics present within feminine social circles. Moreover, she gives one of the earliest examples of a novelist both challenging and deconstructing the perceived definition of the absent mother trope during Victorian England.

The absent mother trope would continue to be a dominant presence throughout many of popular novels of the 19th-century. Novelists like Charles Dickens and Charlotte Bronte utilized

the absent mother to develop compelling orphans. Since many reading these novels had likely never encountered an orphan or knew of the hardships they had to endure, the popularity of the absent mother trope grew. John Mullan notes that the novel grew as a representation of ordinary individuals navigating through the trials of life. Since they have no parents, the orphan is set free from established conventions, thus making them the ideal novelistic character (“Orphans in Fiction”). These young protagonists offered a rather simplistic view of the world around them. As mentioned earlier with the lack of mothers in Gothic novels, if these orphaned children quickly found stability amidst the chaos, would there even be a captivating story to tell? These novelists turned to an absent mother as a means to drive their plot.

This literary treatment of orphaned children and absent parental figures would continue throughout both the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries. Charles Dickens, one of the most prolific and influential authors of nineteenth-century England, often placed orphans squarely in the leading role of his most famous works. Both *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* present the novel’s action through the eyes of abandoned children, Oliver and Pip respectively. Pip is perhaps one of Dickens most popular and well-known characters. While not completely orphaned, readers learn early in the novel that Pip’s only recollections of his parents are “unreasonably derived from their tombstones.” Pip is the youngest of five, and his siblings died in infancy (Dickens, *Great Expectations* 1-2). He is left in the care of his sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery. While acting in place of his mother, Mrs. Joe is quick to anger and often takes pride in how she has raised Pip “by hand.”

Throughout his turbulent relationship with his sister, Pip finds comfort in his friendship with her husband, Joe Gargery. Joe often keeps Pip out of trouble and is, in essence, a father to the young boy. Pip, however, later rebels against the simple life that was once comfortable to him when he is introduced to the affluent Miss Havisham and her young ward, Estella. With this

1861 publication, Dickens attempts to subvert the typical happy ending promised to young orphans. While Pip is often viewed as an orphan, he is never without some parental guidance. Still he rejects the notion of a traditional upbringing from Joe and Mrs. Gargery for a more lavish lifestyle provided by Magwitch's criminal ways.

Additionally, he rejects potential romance with Biddy because of her common station. At the core of *Great Expectations* is Pip's tale of innocence and experience. It is a theme that will repeat throughout the British canon of literature. Dickens' execution merely experiments with the form while questioning Pip's agency. Is he performing as a gentleman to please himself, Estella, or later, Magwitch? Similar to Catherine from *Northanger Abbey*, Pip's care and progression from childhood to adulthood is in the hands of surrogates lacking the capability to either provide proper guidance (Joe) or use his development for ulterior means (Magwitch).

Where *Great Expectations* deviated slightly from the traditional absent mother formula, Dickens's earlier text, 1854's *Hard Times*, more encapsulated the idea of "protagonist prosperity." A rarity in his long line of work, *Hard Times* is the shortest of Dickens' novels and the only one not to include scenes set in London. *Hard Times* examines English society while satirizing both the social and economic conditions of the Victorian era. While not the novel's focus, Sissy Jupe is the only abandoned child present within *Hard Times*. She is the moral center of the entire text and operates as the antithesis to the cold Utilitarian Thomas Gradgrind. Sissy's eccentric background as the daughter of a circus performer goes against Gradgrind's philosophy of, "In this life, we want nothing but Facts." As the schoolmaster, this viewpoint extends to student relations. When readers are first introduced to Sissy, she is simply known as "Girl Number Twenty" (Dickens, *Hard Times* 7-8). He is not interested in the origins of her nickname nor is interested in nurturing her imagination. Sissy, while not at the forefront of the plot,

continues to play a significant role in the events of *Hard Times*. Sissy, like Eleanor in *Northanger Abbey*, occupies a unique subset within the absent mother trope. Without a model for her own behavior, Sissy becomes a nurturer to the Gradgrind family. Her hard childhood and life of nurturing others is rewarded at the novel's end as she is a wife and surrounded by "happy children loving her" (Dickens, *Hard Times* 274). This idea of the abandoned child turned mother will continue with the 1847 publication of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

Written in the vein of popular Gothic literature and published Brontë's *Jane Eyre* focuses its narrative entirely on its eponymous female hero. Borrowing from the Gothic genre, Jane's mother and father died from typhus when she was just an infant (Brontë 31). She is sent to live with her maternal uncle's family. Jane's uncle, Mr. Reed, is the only family member ever to show her kindness. After his passing, his wife and three children, John, Eliza, and Georgiana treat Jane as though she is a burden. Suffering both physical and psychological torment at the hands of the Reed family, Jane is later sent to the Lowood Institute. While at Lowood, little with her situation improves as the school's conditions are unbearable. The students are given little food, and the rooms are often cold. These conditions later lead to a typhus epidemic killing more than half of the school's population (Brontë 91).

Unlike Sissy from *Hard Times*, readers of *Jane Eyre* are privy to the side effects of Jane's childhood psychological torture. Throughout the text, Jane is often depicted as being "in her own head." This behavior is evident during the incident in the "red-room" in which Jane not only hallucinates, she experiences one of the first of many self-reflecting lamentations:

What a consternation of soul was mine that dreary afternoon! How all my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection! Yet in what darkness, what dense ignorance, was the mental battle fought! I could not answer the ceaseless inward question—why I thus

suffered; now, at the distance of—I will not say how many years, I see it clearly. (Bronte 19)

As Jane ages and the story progresses from Gateshead to Lowood, and finally Thornfield Hall, she is plagued with loneliness and insecurity. However, in the same fashion as Dickens, everything comes together for Jane. By the end of the novel, she has received an inheritance and the love of her life. Like other novels from the same period, Jane, too, is prosperous in the end. Her tale differs from Sissy's and even Eleanor's in how readers are invited to see the psychological complexity of her early development—a predominate trait common among the Postmodern novels later discussed.

Both Jane and Sissy received endings fitting of their respective plights. Their collective characters, both during and after their sufferings, is impressive given their lack of strong maternal figures. The idea of "separate spheres" influenced behaviors of the sexes in nineteenth-century England. While men could enter the public sphere of business, women were confined to the private realm of family. Victorian women were expected to remain virtuous, pure, and untainted by dangerous worldly with the household as her only focus (Hoffman 265). No author depicted this gender divide better than Charlotte Bronte. From the mouth of her heroine, Jane Eyre, Bronte details the psychological restraint visible from England's separate spheres:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (Bronte 129-130)

While it appears that authors like Bronte were aware of the complications from this gender divide, many families continued to idolize the idea of “the angel in the house” established by the reign of Queen Victoria and later through the 1862 narrative poem of the same name by Coventry Patmore.

As noted by Joan M. Hoffman in her article for *Pacific Coast Philology*, Patmore’s ideal Victorian wife “...loves with love that cannot tire” (Hoffman 264). The Victorian wife was unquestionably subservient to her husband. This, additionally, is covered by Bronte through Jane’s relationship with Mr. Rochester. Throughout her time at Thornfield, Jane often refers to her soon-to-be husband as “master.” By the novel’s closing chapters, she is selflessly caring for her disabled lover.

Similarly, Sissy exhibits caring and maternal habits. After she is taken in by the Gradgrind family, Sissy cares for both the ailing matron and the youngest Gradgrind child, Jane. Both young women lacked strong model figures in their youth, but still, both exhibit many of “the angel in the house” characteristics. Jane and Sissy are both generous, meek, and pure. If the Victorian mother is meant to pass such traits along to her daughters, what does this say about the development of Bronte and Dickens’ orphan girls? Both end up as mothers and wives by the end of their respective tales, so having each “pre-modeled” into their future roles can be viewed as part of their deserved happiness and prosperity.

The chapters to come will trace how popular novelists within Britain’s Postmodern movement have subverted the absent mother trope. Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* will act as a tie between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the following centuries. While mocking the popularity of Gothicism, McEwan recognizes the inherent danger present within misunderstandings born from Catherine’s obsession. Mothers, while not at the forefront of either novel, are identified as both a key and



potential solution to the ensuing chaos. The need for protagonists with dysfunctional or absent mothers to be prosperous has long since dissolved. McEwan, Atkinson, and Swift are all aware of how maternal absence can lead to confusion and trauma and their novels dissect how each young heroine attempts to resolve the loss.

## CHAPTER 3

### ATONEMENT

British novelist and screenwriter McEwan opened his 2001 metafictional novel, *Atonement*, with an epigraph from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. In two separate interviews, Ian McEwan characterized his Jane Austen literary influence. When questioned by *Newsweek*, McEwan mentioned that he referred to *Atonement* in his notebooks as "my Jane Austen Novel." He additionally states that "[I] didn't have *Northanger Abbey* or even *Mansfield Park* specifically in mind, but I did have a notion of a country house and some discrepancies beneath the civilized surface" (qtd. in Wells). While there may not have been a single novel influence behind *Atonement*, McEwan's obvious influence for his young protagonist, Briony Tallis, is apparent in the accompanying epigraph. In an additional interview, he states:

Catherine Morland, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, was a girl so full of the delights of Gothic fiction that she causes havoc around her when she imagines a perfectly innocent man to be capable of the most terrible things. For many, many years I've been thinking how I might devise a hero or heroine who could echo that process in Catherine Morland, but then go a step further and look at, not the crime, but the process of atonement, and do it in writing—do it through storytelling, I should say (qtd. in Wells).

Additionally, scholars have drawn comparisons between McEwan's young protagonist and Jane Austen herself. In an article published for *Persuasions*, assistant professor Juliette Wells states that while Briony's youthful writing is not suggestive of Austen's juvenilia, it is her concerns with language and professionalism that is the more reminiscent of Austen (Wells 103). Other

fans have theorized and found allusions to Austen's other novels within *Atonement*, but McEwan has neither confirmed nor refuted these speculations.

Austen critics often view the passage chosen by McEwan for his epigraph as the pinnacle of Catherine's Gothicism fueled misunderstanding:

Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting? (qtd. in McEwan)

Here, Henry has just admonished his future wife for her overactive imagination and the damage it can cause. With the inclusion of this segment, McEwan is creating a parallel between Briony and Catherine. Similarly, the identities of both are compromised by an unhealthy obsession with fiction. McEwan, however, offers a unique interpretation of the absent mother trope. Both *Northanger Abbey* and *Atonement* are novels about novels. Behind the dangers of a life obsessed with fiction lies a more dangerous narrative. While Catherine's love of Gothic literature and additional misguidance from lacking surrogate mother figures, like Mrs. Allen, fuel the events of *Northanger Abbey*, McEwan uses Briony Tallis and the coddled and disrupted dynamic of her family—in particular the relationship with her mother—to explore both themes of misunderstanding and the need for personal atonement.

Divided into three sections spanning nearly sixty-five years, *Atonement* chronicles the events that transpire from Briony's mistaken identification of her sister Cecilia's lover, Robbie Turner, in the rape of her maternal cousin Lola. Unlike *Hard Times* and *Jane Eyre*, *Atonement* operates as a metafictional novel. It is self-consciously aware that it is a work of fiction and McEwan cleverly wraps this up in Briony's talent and obsession with writing fiction. The earliest indication of this and of the curtain pull that will occur at the novel's end happens in Chapter Three. Unable to fully interpret the scene of sexual tension between Robbie and Cecilia that had just happened by the fountain, McEwan uses Briony to clue readers into the fact that this novel is, indeed, Briony's atonement:

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folktales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935. She would be well aware of the extent of her self-mythologizing, and she gave her account a self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone. (McEwan 38)

Hidden within McEwan's memorable prose, the passage is easily missed on an initial read. With Briony's early rich diet of creative literature, it is understandable that she would turn to fiction in order to process the events unfolding around her. While her mother, Emily Tallis, is alive through the earlier events of *Atonement*, she does not play an active role in her young daughter's development. This maternal disconnect, as demonstrated throughout this thesis chapter, only exacerbates Briony's misinterpretation of events ultimately leading to the crime she cannot rightfully atone for.

Throughout *Atonement*'s entirety, Emily, mother to Leon, Cecilia, and Briony, is the primary focus of only one chapter. Her chronic migraines, described early in Chapter Six as a heaviness in her brain, often leave her bed-ridden and unable to care for her youngest child. While the arrival of Briony restored some of Emily's maternal instincts, these are juxtaposed against the overall disconnect felt with all her children. The migraines have caused her to stop "giving her children all a mother should." This disconnect, in turn, has resulted in them calling her by her first name. There are still maternal feelings inside of Emily, as she notes her "habitual fretting" and the sixth-sense she has developed from her bed-ridden absences (McEwan 62-3). These are, however, juxtaposed by McEwan against the reality that is her emotional disconnect from her children.

There is no discord between Emily and her son. She seems to want what is best for Leon. Her relationship with her daughters, on the other hand, is more complicated. Earlier in the novel, Cecilia attempts to make a meaningful connection with her ill mother. However, Emily is only interested in "mundane conversation" (McEwan 19). During her musings in Chapter Six, readers are allowed further insight into Emily's relationship with her eldest daughter. McEwan is clever to note that Cecilia's persistent talk about her time at Cambridge makes her mother "a little cross, though not remotely jealous." History, however, tells a different story (McEwan 61). Emily and Cecilia are not only from differing generations but differing historical movements. Cecilia is of the appropriate age to have come up during the height of the British Women's Suffrage. McEwan never clues readers into the real reason behind Emily's disdain for Cecilia's Cambridge education, but it is possible to read feelings akin to fear. Emily is from a generation clinging to ideals established during the Victorian era. It is natural that all of the changes initiated during the beginnings of the feminist movement would cause some anxiety. This is

projected through her hostility over women “riding about on a man’s bike” because these “ignorant ladies would be long dead and still revered at High Table and spoken of in lowered voices” (McEwan 62).

Emily was well past the typical child-bearing years, so Briony’s appearance was “late and unexpected” (McEwan 64). She was caring for her youngest daughter well into her forties and seemed to revel in it (McEwan 64-5). Early in the novel, Emily even applauds Briony’s creative endeavors after the completion of her play, *The Trials of Arabella*. However, when alone with her thoughts, Emily denounces Briony’s creative nature:

Her daughter was always off and away in her mind, grappling with some unspoken, self-imposed problem, as though the weary, self-evident world could be reinvented by a child. Useless to ask Briony what she was thinking. There was a time one would have received a bright and intricate response that would in turn have unfolded silly and weighted questions to which Emily gave her best answers ... Now the demons of self-consciousness and talent had struck her daughter dumb. (McEwan 63)

Unlike the traditional idea of the absent mother Emily is an active but dysfunctional presence in the lives of her three children. She is still detached even though the later birth of her youngest child seems to renew her maternal instincts. Psychoanalytic critic and educator, Coppelia Khan, explored themes of childhood development in her essay, “The Absent Mother in *King Lear*.” Written with Shakespeare in mind, Khan expands upon ideas established by Freud—it is through family interaction that children learn how to behave as men and women (241). Echoes of this developmental deficiency can be found in Cecilia’s early interactions with Robbie, and even more so with Briony’s retreat into fiction, her uneasy relationship with Lola, and her mistaken

identification of her cousin's rapist. Through her detachment from her daughters, Emily has effectively robbed them of their only means of mimicking womanhood.

Additionally absent from her development is Briony's father, Jack Tallis. According to the model established by Khan, the mother is accountable for the nurturing of the children and the father's role is that of spiritual guide and disciplinarian (246). Both positions, unfortunately, are not Jack's specialty. Jack uses the impending conflict that would give way to World War II as an excuse to absorb himself in his work. Moreover, it is hinted that he is unfaithful to his wife (McEwan 139). If we go back to Khan's previous statement about the family being one's first introduction to a child's development into adulthood, Briony's notion of this transition is skewed. The dysfunction present within the Tallis family also contributes to what can be identified as narcissism in Briony.

The importance attached to Briony's writing is evident from *Atonement's* opening pages. Unlike most novels which open with an introduction to the protagonist, *Atonement* opens with a description of Briony's play, *The Trials of Arabella*. The novel's tone does not reflect that of a child on the brink of adolescence; rather, more attention is paid to Briony as an author. In his article, "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," Brian Finney quotes McEwan's acknowledgment of the writing process. In an interview, McEwan states that "I sometimes feel that every sentence contains a ghostly commentary on its own process" (Finney 70). While McEwan is obviously able to disconnect reality from his own constructed fantasy, Briony is unable to do the same with her own body of creative work. She is unable to understand the dangers that can ensue from modeling one's conduct in an artificial world (Finney 69-70). Evidence of this is scattered throughout *Atonement*, but it is perhaps most evident in the previously mentioned quote from the fountain incident. In retrospect, Briony

understands that her juvenilia is rife with immature inconsistencies. Yet, even being aware of this, her self-mythologizing is what she turns to time and time again as she tries to understand the events taking place around her—both in youth and later as she reaches the end of her days.

Present throughout *Atonement* is the work of ego psychologist Erik Erikson. Inspired by Freud's theories, Erikson focused more on psychosocial development rather than psychosexual development. Like Freud's psychosexual theory, Erikson's theory for psychological development believed that one's personality develops in stages. Unlike Freud's model, Erikson's described the impact of the social experience across the whole lifespan and are as follows: Trust vs. Mistrust, Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, Initiative vs. Guilt, Industry vs. Inferiority, Identity vs. Confusion, Intimacy vs. Isolation, Generality vs. Stagnation, and Integrity vs. Despair (Cherry and Gans). Being thirteen during the early events of *Atonement*, Briony would be amid the fifth stage—Identity vs. Confusion. However, as Briony attempts to tackle adult situations beyond her comprehension, readers are reminded just how childlike she still is. Her internal conflict is juxtaposed with her need to craft her narrative: "Everything connected. It was her own discovery. It was her story, the one that was writing itself around her" (McEwan 147, 156). However, pages prior, during the search for Lola's brothers, the twins, and mere moments before the discovery of Lola's assault, Briony is comparing running through the dark to the sensation of flying. According to Erikson's model, Briony should currently be developing a sense of personal identity that would follow her through further developmental milestones (Cherry and Gans). Yet, her behavior, both the juvenile and the need to comprehend personal relationships before she is ready, combined with her inactive relationship with her mother lead to an inability to process the guilt she feels later as the novel progresses.



Briony's narcissism and need to fit all that is thrown at her, whether she understands it or not, into her world of fiction has left her with a god complex. In her article, "'Before the Destruction Began' Interrupting Post-Imperial Melancholia in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," scholar Cynthia Quarrie notes that while the purpose of Briony's novel was atonement, it was ultimately impossible to achieve. She, as the novelist, is God and therefore has no higher power to appeal to. She cannot apologize to Robbie and Cecilia, yet, she has absolute narrative sovereignty over them (Quarrie 204-05). While on the surface, Briony appears aware of the gravity of her cousin's attack, even going as far as acknowledging the moment as "entirely Lola's," yet, she still yearns to be in the spotlight. She is a master of exaggerating her importance. After all, she is their "only vital source." However, McEwan is also clever to note that Briony's "vital role fueled her own certainty" (McEwan 162-3). Like with *The Trials of Arabella*, Briony is still crafting her fiction. Unfortunately, it comes with the price of manipulating both her own importance and her misunderstanding of the events unfolding around her.

In addition to this manipulation to further her prose, Briony chooses to invade Cecilia's private space. Briony understands her account of the assault is a fabrication; thus, she needs "evidence, cleanly independent of her version." With little regard to her sister's feelings, she provides the police officers with the explicit love letter that Robbie had prior written to Cecilia. Briony proceeds to delight in the chaos she has created because of the reaction she receives from the surrounding adults (McEwan 165-66, 168). If we turn back to Erikson's developmental model, Briony is a case study in the repercussions of not meeting these milestones. Emily's constant doting on her daughter's writing ability has left her youngest arrogant. In the earlier mentioned moment of her reflecting on each of her children while fighting away her migraine,

Emily unintentionally touches on this. Her statement that "...the demons of self-consciousness and talent had struck her daughter dumb" nearly mirrors the protentional negative outcome of Erikson's Industry vs. Inferiority (McEwan 65). Briony being "dumb" is not an assessment of her intelligence. It is more of an observation of her silence. As depicted throughout the previous pages of this chapter, young Briony never once stops to question the events unfolding around her. Instead, she is continually searching for ways to incorporate the real-life family drama into her world of fiction.

Emily does not make another appearance until the dinner and the events following Lola's assault. Furthermore, it is the first and only time in the novel she attempts to fulfill her role as a mother. McEwan notes that the management of the family during such horrific events would typically fall to Cecilia. However, Emily "...untypically...rose to the crisis, free of migraine and the need to be alone" (McEwan 164). Yet, her interaction with Briony can be viewed as a juxtaposition of their moment shared at the beginning of *Atonement*. After Emily finishes reading *The Trials of Arabella*, she takes her youngest daughter into her arms and places her on her lap. Twice during the investigation, Briony retreats to the comfort of her mother. As Cecilia listens in on the interrogation, Briony becomes "nervous of her" and keeps close to Emily's side. Later, Briony notes the comfort she feels by using her mother as a shield from Cecilia's glare and the present police officers. Her final "motherly" act comes during Briony's formal interview with the police. As Briony recounts her take on what transpired, Emily stands by her daughter (McEwan 4, 164-68). McEwan cleverly notes that Briony is sitting at a writing desk. In a symbolic nod to the fiction Briony has been crafting, her mother is present at its end.

Youth and adolescence built on an obsession with fiction and a lack of maternal influence presents Briony with additional emotional hurdles as she enters young adulthood. As Briony

foregoes attending Cambridge, readers of *Atonement* learn about her difficulty processing guilt over the grief she has caused. During the second section of the novel, we learn through letters exchanged between Cecilia and Robbie that Briony has become a nurse. An act, best described by Cecilia, is a sort of penance as Briony desires to remain “useful in a practical way” (McEwan 199). Her tumultuous journey through that hot summer day and the early stages of adolescence have led to a weak sense of self. Briony even abandons her name upon becoming a Nightingale. She is indirectly acting out her desire to atone, replacing her identity with an “N. Tallis” nametag is the ultimate act of humility (Pastoor 207). Through Erikson’s model, the purpose of the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage is the development of ego identity or one’s conscious sense of self that is developed through social interaction. Failure to fully develop one’s ego identity can lead to insecurity and confusion about one’s future (Cherry and Gans). Briony’s decision to pursue nursing is evidence of missed psychosocial developmental milestones.

Briony’s underdeveloped sense of self followed her into her nursing career and early adult years. Erikson’s sixth development stage, Intimacy vs. Isolation, is marked by the exploration of personal relationships (Cherry and Gans). When readers of *Atonement* are reunited with Briony, she is already well acclimated to the rigorous routine of Nightingale Nurse that she appears critical of how her fellow nurses cope with loneliness and homesickness:

It seemed theatrical to Briony, and ridiculous, grown young women tearful for their mothers, or as one of the student put it through her sobs, for the smell of Daddy’s pipe. Those doing the consoling seemed to be enjoying themselves rather too much. In this cloying atmosphere Briony sometimes wrote her own concise letters home...Other girls proudly wrote out their exacting routines of work and study to astound their loving parents. (McEwan 261)

Briony avoids her mother's direct questions and chooses to confide more in her journal than anyone she encounters. Pages prior, Briony seems to be lamenting the difficulty she has making friends. She states that "...friendships were not easy to cultivate" and lists the daily duties she shares with others. On the same page, she also notes that "...she herself was a barrier to friendship" (McEwan 258). Throughout her time at the hospital, Briony only has close interactions with three individuals: Sister Drummond, Fiona, and Luc. Each of these acquaintances is born either from obligation or convenience, thus further giving way to Briony's difficulty building relationships with others.

Additionally, readers are privy to how Briony's dysfunctional relationship with her mother has impacted her adult relationships. Briony is unable to keep and cultivate deep friendships with other peers. She has difficulty navigating the workforce. And, finally, through the hints with Luc, one could read that Briony may have a deficiency navigating romantic relationships. McEwan notes no interest in another or any boyfriend in Briony's life. While her act with Luc could be viewed as a moment of selfless comforting of a dying man, she momentarily harbors fantasies of what an actual relationship with Luc could be like. Moreover, it is likely her overly critical attitude towards her cohorts and their evening routines stems from a desire to be closer to her own family. The dysfunction nature of the Tallis family combined with her guilt over Robbie, however, leaves her unable to reciprocate.

While Briony appears almost disinterested in maintaining a close relationship with her mother, her need to atone for Robbie's mistaken identification that summer night in 1935 has become a near obsession. The fiction, which could be viewed as the root of her juvenile crime, has become a means of displacement for the young adult. Briony has continued to write, as evident with both the novella submitted to *Horizon* magazine and the entirety of *Atonement's*

final two sections, and it is merely a defense mechanism. During the closing pages of the novel's second section, Briony has confronted the tragedy that is the repercussions of her actions. Thought not open to immediate forgiveness, Robbie and Cecilia are willing to give her an understandably limited opportunity to make amends. As she leaves their apartment with a renewed sense of purpose and the hope for a rekindled relationship with her sister, the section's closing lines are a painful reminder of what will not be: "She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin. BT London, 1999" (McEwan 330). Briony's "atonement" and her obsession are one and the same—her fiction.

Emily Tallis is mentioned a final time in the novel's epilogue. Given *Atonement's* timeframe, it comes as no surprise to learn she has long since passed. Briony is visiting her childhood home, and this naturally sparks memories of Emily's funeral. She additionally mentions a brooch that belonged to her mother (McEwan 340, 342). McEwan, interestingly enough, juxtaposes Briony's continuing disconnect with her mother. The brooch as mentioned above is used to pin in place a white satin scarf. While she wears this treasured memento close to her heart, Briony still refers to her mother by her first name—Emily. Briony, and by extension, the novel's, final moments, however, are not of the damaged relationship. Her musings are of her god complex and, in her own words, her stand against oblivion.

The Mayo Clinic officially defines Narcissistic Personality Disorder as "a mental condition in which people have an inflated sense of their importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others." Throughout *Atonement* Briony experiences a litany of Narcissistic Personality Disorder's symptoms including having a sense of entitlement, preoccupation with fantasy, and an inability to recognize

the needs of others. While the Mayo Clinic notes that there is no known cause for Narcissistic Personality Disorder, one link has been made to a person's environment ("Narcissistic Personality Disorder"). At its core, *Atonement* is Briony's futile attempt to mend the rift caused in her foolish, fiction-obsessed youth. The greatest rift, that between the Tallis children and their mother, remains unexplored. If Emily had spent more time parenting Briony instead of lavishing her with excessive adoration, perhaps her youngest daughter would have developed a better sense of self and would have been more equipped to process the events of that summer day in 1935.

## CHAPTER 4

### BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE MUSEUM

At the heart of Kate Atkinson's fictional debut, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, is the relationship between protagonist Ruby Lennox and her mother, Bunty. The Lennox family narrative is heavily marred with both tragedy and dissatisfaction, and Atkinson masterfully weaves Ruby's tumultuous upbringing amongst chapters recounting with both poignancy and humor the various tales of her female Yorkshire ancestors. A theme frequently explored in her fiction, Sinead McDermott notes in her article that Atkinson's work often explores the family as a disturbing place full of as many resentments and jealousies as love and affection (McDermott 67). Unique to *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, Atkinson begins Ruby's story at the earliest point possible—her conception. While Bunty will remain a dominant figure throughout her daughter's life, Ruby, shortly after her own birth, shows immediate disappointment claiming she has been given “the wrong mother:”

I am not very happy, but I have decided to make the best of things. I've been given the wrong mother and am in danger of embarking on the wrong life but I trust it will all be sorted out and I will be reunited with my real mother—the one who dropped ruby-red blood onto a snow-white handkerchief and wished for a little girl with hair the colour of a shiny jet-black raven's wing. Meanwhile I make do with Bunty. (Atkinson 42-3)

Bunty, like her youngest daughter, shares feelings of dissatisfaction with her station in life. From the novel's earliest pages, Bunty is described as “irritable, an emotion with which she's very comfortable,” and this appears to be linked to relationship regret. George, her husband, and Ruby's father was not her first choice of husband. In fact, in the early morning, mere hours after Ruby's conception, she is alone in the kitchen, lamenting her lost lover, Buck. Buck was an

American sergeant who returned to the United States after the war. In the end, she chose a life with George when Buck failed to write (Atkinson 12, 15). Both disappointments are documented early in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and set the overall tone of the novel. Instead of devoting herself to her family, Bunty is too preoccupied with what could have been with her life. Similar to Emily from *Atonement*, this lends to the dysfunctional current that runs rampant throughout the Lennox family dynamic.

Within these early chapters, Atkinson is establishing a fairy tale, or “real mother” motif that will reoccur throughout the narrative. While much of the novel is dedicated to Ruby and Bunty’s dynamic, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* attempts to reconcile the trials of the lives of Ruby’s female ancestors. Upon viewing a rare photograph of her great-grandmother, Alice, Ruby vows to, “...rescue this lost woman from what’s going to happen to her (time)” (Atkinson 29). Like other Postmodern novels, Atkinson is playing with the concept of pastiche. Ruby has a photograph to go by but no real story to tell. So, buried within this memoir and family history is a narrative that operates both as a fairy tale and as a detective novel. However, this can also be viewed in how a child’s consciousness develops.

In her article, Fiona Tolan quotes from Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantments: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Ruby takes the one tangible piece of evidence, the photograph, and fills the void with imaginative details. According to Bettelheim, “Fantasy fills the huge gap in a child’s understanding which are due to the immaturity of his thinking and his lack of pertinent information” (qtd. in Tolan 277). Atkinson uses her child protagonist’s fairy tale predilection to subvert the notion of the idealized fantasy of mothers and the often disappointing reality left at the core of these fabrications. Throughout the early narrative of *Behind the Scenes*



*at the Museum*, Ruby's imagination not only pieces together missing sections of her family history, but it also aids her in dealing with the trauma and abusive present within her home life.

While her narrative is ripe with childlike imagination, Atkinson presents it to readers in a form similar to doubleness. She is a child but speaks with knowledge beyond her years. Ruby embodies both innocence and experience (Parker 31). This paradox is perhaps most evident when her older sister, Patricia, confides in Ruby her intent to lose her virginity. Patricia's desperation for a confidant is juxtaposed against Ruby's naivety. Upon announcing her intention to her younger sister, she is met with a misguided and immature offer of assistance with looking for the soon-to-be-lost virginity. Mere moments later, Ruby is still having difficulty understanding what her older sister means by "it." She relates the act of intercourse to having a tooth extracted. Ruby exhibits enough maturity to connect with Patricia through a mutual understanding of being wanted (Atkinson 199-201).

Additionally, Ruby's vocabulary throughout further illustrates this contradiction presented through this narrative doubleness. While she boasts having an "astonishingly mature vocabulary list of ten words," this list includes complex words and phrases like "nomenclature" and "Sisyphean nightmare" (Parker 31). The heart of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and its complex history lies in the dichotomy that is Ruby. She is without a strong mother figure, but similar to Eleanor and Sissy and through this doubleness, Ruby is both the naïve child from prior incarnations of the absent mother trope, and the later abandoned child turned nurturer.

In direct opposition to Ruby's precocious nature is Bunty's life tarnished with disappointments and failed expectations. From her earliest introduction, readers are privy to Bunty's unhappiness with domestic life. Her inner monologue, provided through Ruby in utero, wallows in the mundane details of her life—the cooking, the cleaning, the work. Similarly, she is

angry no one told her about the “broken nights, the power struggles...the labour pains” that would come with motherhood (Atkinson 14). Romantic life failed Bunty at a young age. During World War II, she lost her virginity in an act that could be construed as rape. Physical intimacy disgusted her then, and this continued with her marriage to George (Atkinson 89). With such disappointing personal relationships and a history of family dysfunction, Bunty’s disconnected relationship with her daughters appears more normal than not.

Most of Bunty’s demeanor with Ruby can be traced back to the accident that claimed her twin, Pearl’s, life. Instead of investigating the tragedy, Ruby is sent away. Upon returning, Bunty is unable to forgive her youngest for an event fully she can barely comprehend. While her tone is initially welcoming, Ruby also notes that her mother has a “slightly mad air about her” (Atkinson 112). She recoils at any form of affection from Ruby. A simple childhood term of endearment, Mummy, forces Bunty into a fit of rage. Earlier in the novel, she’s dismissive of Ruby’s intelligence stating that “She’s too clever for her good” (Atkinson 73, 202). Even as early as the novel’s opening pages, Bunty harbors ill will not just at Ruby, but at all her children. When a young Gillian is vying for her mother’s attention, Bunty ponders the idea of wiping her entire family out and starting over new (Atkinson 16). Her dissatisfaction with life and motherhood naturally manifests in her interactions with her children in ways that prove to be detrimental to their development.

Through Ruby’s narrative doubleness, Atkinson can explore the “real mother” motif through both a childlike and a mature voice. From the start, Ruby has an idealized concept of the “perfect mother:”

I do not believe that Bunty is my real mother. My real mother is roaming in a parallel universe somewhere, ladling out mother’s milk the color of Devon cream. She’s padding

the hospital corridors searching for me, her fierce, hot, lion-breath, steaming up cold windows. My real mother is Queen of the Night, a huge, galactic figure, treating the Milky Way in search of her lost infant. (Atkinson 42)

As she is weaving this meta-narrative of women in unhappy relationships and situations, Ruby's disappointment lacks in complexity. While she will later enter into her own unhappy marriage, the bulk of the novel focuses on her complicated mother-daughter relationship.

Ruby's idealized "perfect mother" is rooted in fairy tales. Like Briony Tallis in *Atonement*, Ruby's agency is better defined by fiction and fantasy. To Ruby, her mother is this idealized notion that frankly does not exist. Echoes of this romanticized mother are present throughout her relationship with Bunty and the subsequently narrated family histories. The earliest of these stories, Alice's, revises the story of the family romance, a psychological complex identified by Sigmund Freud. Freud's fixation claims that when a child's desire for a parent's attention is not met, he or she will seek an alternative parent figure. It is not that the parenting the child receives is inadequate, but rather that it is impossible for any parent to satisfy their unreasonable demands (qtd. in McDermott). When Ruby is first shown the photograph of Alice, her mind immediately relates the story in an easier to comprehend fairytale frame. Rachel, who is harsh and disciplinary, exhibits traits akin to a wicked stepmother, while Alice, is revered as the iconic mother figure whose affection is sorely missed (McDermott 72). Rachel plays the role of "the unreal mother, the false bride," and this allows Ruby to reconcile better the beginning cycle of abuse that will repeat from generation to generation the only way she knows how—through fantasy. Alice is the damsel in distress who fantastically disappears. Rachel plays the role of the wicked stepmother.

In Freud's family romance complex, the child's fantasy parents are typical of a higher social class than their real parents. Additionally, Freud's original idea was rooted in father-son relationships. As McDermott notes, Atkinson's novels function as a variation on this idea. Ruby's fantasies are rooted in her role as the cuckoo of the family (McDermott 70). Throughout *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, Atkinson's more matriarchal driven adaptation of Freud's complex. Ruby is not searching for a mother from nobility. Rather, she simply yearns for the mother she was denied—one that would make her their primary focus. Atkinson presents Ruby with an alternate mother figure through her father's mistress, Auntie Doreen.

When Bunty temporarily disappears, Ruby, her sister, and her cousin, Lucy-Vida are left in the care of Mrs. Collier, or as George instructs them to address her, "Auntie Doreen." Described by Ruby as "a soft, round, brown sort of woman, older than our mother but with less make-up and hair-dye," readers are immediately greeted with a gentler mother figure than that of Bunty. Moreover, George appears more comfortable in Auntie Doreen's presence than ever depicted with Bunty. As they drive through Whitby, the pair share intimate banter and laughter. Ruby is even aware of George's cheerful attitude as his laughter sheds at least twenty years from his back (Atkinson 137-8). Even before their extended time together, Auntie Doreen's presence conjures a calm often associated with mother figures.

In stark contrast to her life with Bunty, Atkinson provides Ruby and readers of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* with a home life that her young protagonist could only dream about. Upon entering the flat the children will share with Auntie Doreen, Ruby notices tranquility within the living space. She notes that "the wallpaper is clean and flowery and has not been impregnated with the reek of family dramas and the autumn-leaves carpet and orange curtains of the lounge speak only of holiday good-humor" (Atkinson 139). As McDermott notes, Bunty's

role of motherhood is an expression of duty. Doreen, however, offers the different representation of this maternal archetype. She expresses an honest interest in the children (70). She addresses their innocent inquiries without annoyance. This is beautifully represented when she is questioned about her nationality by Patricia. While it is a simple question, it is one that would have been met with some resistance by Bunty.

Doreen's ability to perform the role that is imposed upon her is perhaps best demonstrated with her additional interactions with Patricia. Being the typical teenager, Patricia greets her new relief caregiver with resistance and rebellion. She is aggressive and even runs away for extended periods of time. Even with this opposition against her temporary station of authority, Doreen provides the teen with the loving care she is lacking from her distant, biological mother. When Patricia sprains her wrist, Doreen expertly and gently bandages her while offering words of support and comfort she would have never received from Bunty. From this point, the contrast between surrogate mother and birth mother, as noted by Ruby, is unavoidable. Shortly following the passage about Patricia's injury, Ruby illustrates the strength of this contrast with Doreen's cooking:

Her cooking for example—with no fuss whatsoever, she produces big, hearty meals of the stew-and-dumpling variety, “Heavy food to weigh you down, Patricia, so you won't run away,” she laughs—and, astonishingly, Patricia laughs along with her! Nor does she have any qualms on the pudding front and dishes up apple and rhubarb pies from Botham's or sticky custard slices—in face anything we care to choose on our daily visits to the shops (Atkinson 140).

Doreen's role and presence are meant to act as a subversion to Bunty's character. It is possible that Atkinson meant for Doreen to be a throwback to an earlier time for women.

Additionally, Doreen's position in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* can be viewed as a throwback to the separate spheres of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain. While Bunty represents a more modern interpretation of the British woman, Doreen is portrayed in a light similar to Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House." Prior to their departure home, Ruby notes that, for the first time in their young lives, they "say our prayers before we go to bed." Further adding to the idea that Doreen may be responsible for the spiritual guidance of the children, she instructs the children with their prayers by advising them to add a "PS asking God to look after Mummy and Daddy" (Atkinson 142). Atkinson fails to expand further on the notion that Doreen is the reincarnation of nineteenth-century gender division. Therefore, there is no further nurturing of Ruby or her sister's religious needs. The children return to their life of dysfunction thus making Doreen a mythical character.

After their brief time together, Auntie Doreen is transformed into something of a fairytale figure. According to McDermott, it is mainly due in part to her ability to live up to the cultural images of motherhood (70). Like the holidays themselves, Auntie Doreen "takes on the quality of myth—faded and tantalizingly beyond recall." As Ruby and her sisters remember their time with her, Auntie Doreen "grew as unreal as Mary Poppins herself" (Atkinson 146). Sadly, with the return to living the wrong life, Ruby and her sister are left with their means for coping and understanding—fantasy.

While Ruby did endure unnecessary emotional abuse from her mother, is her representation of Bunty reliable? In her reader's guide on *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, scholar Emma Parker notes that Bunty does genuinely care about her children. In the note she leaves George before her disappearance, Bunty notes, "you know how much I love the children." Additionally, after Gillian's passing, she becomes more anxious regarding the welfare of her

children. Moreover, contrary to Ruby's accusations of neglect, Bunty is more observant of her children than we, as readers, are led to believe. She is aware of injuries and often checks in on them as they are sleeping (Parker 57). Bunty may be dissatisfied with her life, and while this frustration often manifests through a disconnection with her daughters, she does care for them.

## CHAPTER 5

### WATERLAND

Published in 1983, Graham Swift's *Waterland* is preoccupied with the importance of history and its function as the primary source of the narrative. Shortlisted for the Booker Prize, Swift's premier novel follows Tom Crick, an aging history teacher who is being forced into early retirement. After being antagonized by one of his students, Price, Tom is compelled to draw on his narrative while recounting local history and genealogy, thereby replacing the standard history curriculum with his personal and family history played out against the backdrop of the "official" historical discourse. Playing a significant role in Tom's narrative is his relationship with his wife, Mary Metcalf. Narrated in a fragmented manner common to many Postmodern novels, Tom chronicles their chaotic relationship from its teenage infancy to its middle-aged implosion. Like the other novels that have followed, the absent mother trope plays a significant role in the novel's narrative.

Persistent throughout this account is the absence of strong maternal figures for both Tom or Mary. While Tom's absent mother is related, I will focus more on the impact growing up without a mother had on Mary. Unlike his contemporaries Ian McEwan and Kate Atkinson Swift relies on the traditional absent mother narrative familiar in Gothicism—both Tom's and Mary's mothers are dead before the events of the novel take place. Motherhood, or the absence thereof, plays a more dominant role in Swift's work as opposed to *Atonement* or even the critical of mothers *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. Swift, like McEwan and Atkinson, tackles a more complex idea of one's agency. As we will examine throughout this chapter, Mary, lacking a mother, has no one to fashion her behavior and growth into womanhood after. Her identity, by



extension, is shaped by what both her father and Tom desire—this idealized woman who embodies both the Madonna and whore.

While Swift employs his protagonist in a manner customary to both Postmodernism and historiographic metafiction, scholars argue that his representation of women and Mary Metcalf specifically, is anything but Postmodern. In her article “Mary Metcalf’s Attempt at Exclamation: Maternal Representation in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*,” Katrina M. Powell argues that women characters in Postmodern scholarship are largely ignored. Mary’s representation in scholarship is problematic in that she is represented in one of two ways. Her body is used to mirror the landscape of the novel, the Fens, making her a scenery ripe for invasion and recalcination, or she is viewed as nothing more than a vessel for motherhood (Powell 61-2). Swift alludes to this notion of a woman’s role early in the novel:

Children, women are equipped with a miniature model of reality: an empty but fillable vessel. A vessel in which much can be made to happen, and to issue in consequence. In which dramas can be brewed, things can be hatched out of nothing...[Tom Crick] was responsible for filling the then avid and receptive vessel of Mary Metcalf, later Mrs. Crick. (Swift 42)

While perhaps viewed as an abstract description, the above precedes a chapter titled “About Holes and Things,” leaving little to the imagination or Tom’s figurative analysis. Britain’s Women’s Liberation Movement was still some twenty years away. Birth control would not be readily available until the early 1960s, and the Abortion Act would not legalize abortion in the United Kingdom until 1967. Additionally, the Married Women’s Property act would not be reversed until 1964 (“Timeline of the Women's Liberation Movement”). Women may have been making strides to break free from Victorian limitations, but during Tom and Mary’s youth,

echoes from a gender-divided society were likely still present. Options for Mary to live a rich life as a self-realized woman were still few and far between leaving motherhood as the only available possibility.

Mothers, however, are characteristically absent throughout the entirety of *Waterland*. Mary's mother died during childbirth, which resulted in a strict religious upbringing, and Tom's mother, to whom he was very attached, died of influenza (which she contracted from him) when he was nine years old. When introducing her character in the novel, Swift provides another example of her lack of agency through the following exposition: " 'Mary' became this daughter's inevitable name, and thus Harold Metcalf would have turned her, if only he could, into a little Madonna, who would have been transformed, in due course, into a princess" (Swift 46). While Tom is quick to admit that the absence of a mother drew him and Mary together, his mother is painted in more of a nostalgic light. The opening pages of *Waterland* set the stage for themes of personal history and narrative as a means of coping with and understanding grief. Tom is fixated on his father's storytelling ability—a knack that Tom ascertains was really acquired from his mother. Through the eyes of a young Tom, the Fens are a "fairy-tale land." On the nights when this imaginative illusion was strong, Tom's mother would tell him stories (Swift 2-3). Storytelling will be revisited throughout Tom's narrative. Just like his father sharing stories to deal with the grief of his mother's death, he resorts to similar acts to understand his own torment.

Curiosity is a trait Tom holds in high regard. Curiosity must be present for history to come alive. He stresses its importance to his students:

Children, be curious. Nothing is worse (I know it) than when curiosity stops. Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It's part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. People

die when curiosity goes. People have to find out, people have to know. How can there be any revolution till we know what we're made of? (Swift 206).

In addition to their shared maternal loss, Tom and Mary's relationship is built on a shared curiosity. Later within this chapter, Tom's plea for curiosity will be traced to the lost bond with his mother. Her knack for storytelling is both an inspiration and idealized, and the only way Mary can compete with this instilled passion for curiosity is through her promiscuity.

Interestingly enough, as discussed with the prior chapters, while Tom makes an impassioned plea on behalf of curiosity making and keep history alive, Swift's subversion of the absent mother trope (namely the exclusion of the mother as a storytelling device) does the very same. It is through curiosity that people learn and by extension share their findings. Similarly, it is Mary's curiosity that makes the narrative of *Waterland* possible. Her mother was not present to talk about the changes her body would go through, so she took matters into her own hands.

Additionally, Swift presents a noteworthy observation on grief and how children relate to their parents. While Tom has not fully processed the pain of losing his mother at a young age, Mary "cannot be said to miss her, never having known her [mother]" (Swift 48). Within most family units, sons bond with their mothers while daughters are closer to their fathers. The shared loss of a mother may have brought the two together, but in reality, the two have little in common. Both processed their grief in different ways, and with Tom, the early loss of his mother did little to stunt his development into adolescence. Mary, however, was not so fortunate. The duty of discussing sexuality and female bodily development typically falls to the mother. Given her father's strict upbringing and her birth name, we can conclude that Mary did not receive the sexual education afforded to most. When the pair were both just fifteen, they would meet regularly during summer afternoons to explore "holes" and "things." Mary is considered the

initiator during these trysts. According to Tom, Mary is “the bolder of the two of us.” She was driven by this curiosity to touch, witness, and experience the unknown. Tom described this instinct as Mary having an itch (Swift 50-1). Such verbiage is often akin to the metaphor “scratch that itch” which is typically aligned with male sexual exploration. Tom willingly went along with Mary’s curiosity, as this behavior is viewed as typical for adolescent boys. Later, as Tom laments her loss of curiosity, it can be viewed as his longing for a time when his wife was more sexually liberated. Her growth, or in the case of events to come, her growing mental illness, does not appear in the forefront of his mind until it is too late. She is no longer the wife she once was because he no longer views her through a typical patriarchal lens.

Due mostly in part to her strict religious upbringing, biblical tropes play an important role within the narrative *Waterland*. Interestingly, Swift compares the motherless Mary to the Eve or “mother of all living” (*New King James Version*, Gen. 3:20). Like her biblical counterpart, Mary is constructed as the instigator of sin. Furthermore, Swift draws parallels between Tom and Adam. Tom’s detail of Mary places her in the role of Eve as she is the instigator of their sexual exploration, “It was she whose fingers first got the itch and were at work before I dared, and only then at her prompting—her grabbing and guiding of my hand, her pulling up and pulling down of clothing—to use mine” (Swift 51). Powell argues that this resembles Adam’s plea to his creator, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Powell 64). The purpose of presenting this comparison is to show how Mary will later transform from a strong woman to a weak one as a direct result of her sexual curiosity. While “performing” as a curious teen girl exploring her body, she is viewed as desirable. When she later decides to abort her baby and through the chaos that later follows, Mary, in essence, will become “othered.”

Though she will never become a mother, her actions and lack of education (that would have likely come from her mother) become a dominant theme throughout the rest of the novel.

Tom and Mary's sexual encounters ultimately lead to Mary's pregnancy. As discussed earlier, Mary likely did not receive such education from either her school or father. Still, showing initiative, Mary refuses to consult Tom in her decision to have an abortion. She resolutely declares, "I know what I'm going to do" (Swift 133). Tom is relegated to a background player throughout the ordeal. Powell quotes scholar Judith Wilt that while male fiction writers are "emphatic with women characters, [and] deeply conflicted about women's choices [,] [they] still resonate most profoundly to the special exposures of the man in the matter of maternal choice" (qtd in Powell). This passage forces us as readers to consider several underlying factors. Through Tom's eyes, it is Mary's initial curiosity that attracted him. Her decision to abort Tom's child, additionally ending his patriarchal lineage, snuffs that curiosity. The procedure Mary undergoes will leave her infertile, thus leading to the second complication, where women's subjectivity serves only as a symbolic representation of maternity. Motherhood represents normality. Mary's infertility symbolizes unnaturalness (Powell 72, 74).

Additionally, Mary's refusal to consult with Tom regarding the abortion is troubling. Her curiosity may be at the heart of her predicament; her dismissal of Tom's feelings regarding the matter could be viewed as immature. Pinpointing if this is Swift's intent is ambiguous and perhaps not needed to understand its effect. In an interview with *The Telegraph*, Jasper Rees notes that his shattering tales of parental failure and marital disappointment seem not to mirror his own. His parents had a blameless marriage, and his mother did not abscond or die young (Rees).

Tom has an idolized view of the maternal. In literature and culture, longing for the lost mother is often a dominant theme. Tom is nostalgic for his mother and the women before him, and Mary's role is to reinforce this narrative. Powell quotes Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies professor Lynne Huffer in stating that "under patriarchy, to be a woman is to be a mother" (qtd in Powell). She later concludes that "the maternal figure...can only 'appear' in disguise; as formlessness itself, she can exist only through the borrowing of forms given to her by the paternal, truth-telling system" (qtd in Powell). In addition to longing for his own mother, he longs for a child with Mary. She, however, is quick to refute the idea of adoption stating that "[she] was not a woman to resort to make-believe" (Swift 127). Essentially, he is unable to reconcile the Madonna-whore position that she once occupied in his life. Her curiosity, and by extension her sexuality, is gone. Therefore, Swift is juxtaposing her inability to be a mother to how she no longer fills this romanticized role in Tom's mind.

In an attempt to right the imbalance of the natural order, and her role in this patriarchy-driven narrative, Mary does the only thing she can—she kidnaps a baby. Here is where Swift deviates the most from the traditional absent mother trope established in Chapter One. Throughout the earliest incarnations of the trope, the absence of a maternal figure has been at the heart of the narrative. The prior chapters have depicted how other Postmodern novelists have subverted it through the inclusion of dysfunctional or emotionally absent mothers. Swift, through paying homage to the Gothicism idea of the trope, has provided perhaps the most idiosyncratic of ways. The abortion during her teens left her infertile. While Tom is content with the idea of adoption, Mary believes that the only way to achieve her protagonist prosperity is through becoming a mother. Motherhood, both absent and omnipresent, is the cause of and answer to the chaos within *Waterland*. Mary's identity, for better or worse, is regulated by both the narrative

patriarchy and past societal expectations. However, in order to reconcile her agency that was carved out by the patriarchal system that governed her upbringing, kidnapping a child is the only way she can return to the Madonna her father once viewed her as. While this act is clearly wrong, society and Tom's expectations leave her with no other course of action (Powell 73). Mary full believes God has gifted her with this child, when in reality, she stole it from a mother at the grocery store. Interestingly enough, Swift does not depict Mary as the criminal in this scenario:

And she's not wearing the looks of a villainous child-thief, she's not wearing the looks of a vicious criminal. She's wearing the looks of a young mother who's never been a mother before. Her face has shed a succession of masks (menopausal wife, ex-age-care offices, history teacher's life-long, long-suffering mate); she's all innocence and maidenhood. A Madonna – and child. (Swift 265)

It is through this description that Mary is brought back full-circle to her youth. The taint from her long-endured trauma has melted away and Tom, for a moment, sees her in the same light as her own father once did. Mary has never once been her own woman in the eyes of her husband.

In essence, Swift has employed Julia Kristeva's interpretation of abjection. Typically applied to the portrayal of women in horror movies, abjection is simply defined as "the state of being cast off." Kristeva's analysis further describes abjection as the feeling when individual experiences what she calls "corporeal reality," or a breakdown in the distinction between what is self and what is Other (Fletcher and Benjamin 93). When Mary breaks from reality, she becomes a version of the Other. She is no longer the curious youth Tom fell in love with. Moreover, Mary is no longer the virginal princess her father once envisioned or the stoic wife of Tom. She had no

one to guide her through the journey of becoming a woman—a role characteristically reserved to one’s mother.

Nor does she now have a place in society. Powell illustrates this through a quote from Silvia Tubert’s article, “The Deconstruction and Construction of Maternal Desire: *Yerma* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*,”: “[t]he definition of maternity as a natural act is an ideological representation, which provides a totalizing and unifying image of the woman as mother, a solid and coherent identity” (Tubert 85). After kidnapping the baby, Mary is placed in an asylum. She is removed from her home and the world she once inhabited. Swift uses Tom and his ability to identify with the mother of the baby as further means to illustrate this:

She sees me; or rather, she sees the baby. And hears it (before this audience, it wakes up, suddenly bawls its part). She sees only the baby. She doesn’t see me, or Mary behind. She doesn’t see the crowd – blurred faces on a backcloth. She steps forward; she knows, without thinking, her role. She takes her child, not caring who I am, or how or what or where or why. (Swift 313-4)

Returning to Kristeva’s interpretation of abjection, this mother’s role is the natural one. She is sane, and her baby is a sign of her fertility. She is in her proper place. Mary is outside society. She has no signs of fertility (Powell 73). Swift even cleverly places her behind Tom and the rest of the crowd. Even before being committed, she is already ostracized from society. There is no challenging the severity of her crime; Mary is far from innocent. When the course of her life events are examined against the early loss of her mother, she does become a sympathetic character. During the formative years of her life, Mary had no model to look up to, so she performs her gender through sexuality. As the reality of her actions become more than she could handle, she is sent away by her father—an act that foreshadows the later stay in the mental



institution. Throughout *Waterland*, Mary is deprived of allies from her own gender. Her inability to live up to the impossible roles set by her father and later Tom should have come as no surprise.

While relegated to background characters in Tom's exposition to his students, the absence of mothers still plays a dominant role throughout *Waterland*. Conversely, Mary, who has a dominant role in Tom's life and story, never had a mother and will never become one herself. Her growth from young girl to woman is marred by experimentation gone awry. Additionally, she does not have that female influence in her life to model her development after. Unfortunately, this relegates her agency to whatever role she needs to play for society and the men within it. Mary is not the woman she could and should be. With a mother, or someone acting in the role, she would have had better guidance through the difficult adolescent times and would have been better equipped at handling the hormones associated with being a teenager while carving out her later adult role.

Like her contemporaries, Mary's development and identity suffered through the absence of a mother. The 19th-century idea of protagonist prosperity has long since vanished. Briony, while a famous novelist at the end of *Atonement*, is forever haunted by the false accusation from her youth. Ruby, like her female ancestors, has found herself in her own unhappy marriage. Mary, by extension, received the worst fate of the three, but similarly, one that likely would have ended differently had her mother been alive. The subversions of the trope examined within the earlier chapters have brought a new life to a storytelling device often viewed as overused.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Throughout the entirety of this thesis, I have returned again and again to the idea of the absent mother as a "trope." Trope, at its essence, is an ambiguous word to define. Concerning literature, the definition of a trope can typically be attributed to the literary device known as "figure of speech." Within this definition, one is often referred back to other literary devices like metaphor, personification, simile, and hyperbole (Murfin and Ray 526). Within structuralism, we begin to recognize a study of other categories smaller than literature or poetry as many write about subsets ranging from Shakespearean comedies and tragedies to zombie and vampire movies (Parker 52). It is not until we look at trope concerning television shows that we find a place for the discussion presented within this thesis.

*TVTropes.com* is a collection of storytelling devices or conventions found within our favorite shows. The site defines trope as "the means by which a story is told by anyone who has a story to tell" and notes that all can reasonably be recognized by the audience ("Tropes"). The idea of the absent mother trope comes from this definition of the storytelling device. Echoes of the trope traced in Chapter one can additionally be found through this online repository. Listed as "Missing Mom," both tropes share traits, most common being mother dies off-screen, and the child is left alone with challenges to face. The site only briefly mentions a small catalog of literature sharing the absent mother trope or related themes which barely scratches the surface of the American, let alone British, literary canon.

The rest of the thesis expanded upon this television-based definition. As psychoanalysis grew in prominence, more of Britain's authors chose to develop the trope further. Growth and development of these young protagonists became a focus for Postmodern novelists like McEwan

and Atkinson. Both Ruby and Briony share a romanticized, naive view of the world around them. Similar to their 19th-century predecessor, Catherine, both are lost in daydreams and ambition that is perhaps too adult for their young minds. Each shares a quite alive, but emotionally distant, mother and while present in each of their daughters' lives, their presence does little to aid them throughout their pubescent years of self-discovery. Through this subversion of the absent mother trope, McEwan and Atkinson chronicle the dangers to development if one were to be born with the "wrong mother."

Swift, on the other hand, chose to frame his absent mother narrative within a more traditional take on the trope. Mary's mother has long since passed before the events of the novel. Her absence is still felt throughout as Mary attempts to navigate the complexities of teenage pregnancy and subsequent abortion. The narrative would have quickly ended had Tom and Mary chosen to keep their baby. Had Mary been able to consult her mother regarding sexuality and adult relationships, it is likely there would have never been a narrative at all. Acknowledging the absent mother as a means of driving the plot is a trait common to the 19th-century Gothic novels, but Swift still manages to subvert it and make it his own. While the absent mother is needed in order for these stories to continue, more questions remain unanswered. If Emily and Bunty had been more involved in the lives of their daughters, would their stories have changed? Would Briony have had a crime to atone for? Would Ruby have attempted suicide? If Mary's mother had been alive, would she have had a better sense of self? It is entirely possible she would have been more careful with her sexual experimentation as she would have had a more well-rounded education.

While protagonist prosperity was a common theme through the typical 19th-century absent mother plot, the advent of psychoanalysis offered a new interpretation for modern

novelists. In each of the studied texts, the young protagonists suffered from trauma and a variety of complexes. There is no definite way of knowing for sure if Briony, Ruby, and Mary would have led lives free of guilt and anguish. Through each of the three Postmodern narratives lives are destroyed, and each protagonist has scars that will likely never heal. Some of their 19th-century predecessors, like Austen and Bronte, may have been ahead of their time concerning the mental and emotional impact of an absent or dysfunctional mother. It would take time and scientific advancement to understand fully childhood developmental and the full role of parents in the process.

As previously discussed, one of the main purposes of this thesis was to examine the evolution of the absent mother trope. McEwan and Atkinson take exceptional care to craft narratives involving emotionally absent mothers. Neither author may have meant to invoke the timeworn absent mother trope into their novels, yet each novelist addresses the trope in ways that are unique to each, and additionally, speaks from personal experience. In past interviews, Atkinson has spoken candidly about the role single motherhood has played in her life. While speaking to *The Guardian*, Atkinson notes that writing has brought a “combination of biography and therapy” to a life of chaos (Clark). McEwan noted that his parents’ marriage was “quietly dysfunctional” (Koczela). While they were not abusive towards him, his writing seems self-aware of the abuse others endure. His 1975 short story collection, *First Love, Last Rites*, includes stories involving child abuse and rape. Additionally, his 1978 novel, *The Cement Garden*, chronicles children, who after their mother’s death, become wild and incestuous.

Throughout the preceding chapters of this thesis, I have examined and analyzed how the absent mother trope as a literary device has been reinvented and challenged. While some view it as cliched and overused, it continues to make appearances in the British literary canon. Modern

novelists, like J.K. Rowling, still turn to the absent mother to craft compelling characters and narratives. Most everyone, deeply familiar with the novels or not, can identify Harry Potter as “the boy who lived” and are aware of his orphaned status. Additionally, I have examined how the study of tropes can lend to new interpretations and greater understandings of complex texts. An in-depth look into this trope has shown that there is more to these storytelling devices than overused story ideas. Many of these tropes have an often unrealized history within the literary canon and will continue to make appearances so long as novelists continue to hone their craft. Through subverting the trope, these Postmodern novelists have demonstrated that the absent mother trope is far from cliched. Like the literary movements from times passed, understanding and documenting these tropes will continue to change how we read novels for years to come.

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