THE SOURCE OF DESIRE: THE MOTHER IN THREE TWENTIETH CENTURY

NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

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The portrayal of the mother in literature is symbolic of how she is understood in culture. She is the mystery from which life springs and upon which it is put to death. The twentieth century novels *In Search of Lost Time, One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *East of Eden* paint a picture of the mother as she exists in relation to the struggling individual, her child. Each of the novels and each of the mother figures within them exist within a patriarchal structure that characterizes the mother-child relationship and informs our understanding of those relationships. I argue that each of the novels allows for an analysis of the mother in the mother-child relationship as a particular source of growth and struggle: the source of desire. However, I also argue that the mother can be so clearly analyzed this way only because she is understood within a particular, patriarchal context. Her mystery is contained and, often times, contaminated.
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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION AND THEMES: STORIES OF THE MOTHER

The stories of childhood are those told through the mother’s eyes, whispered in the child’s ear from her lips. It is her hands that roll down the cover of the bed, tucking it under her child’s arms. The stories of childhood, of children, and of family, are those of the mother. For, as biology would have it, there would be no children without mothers. This child and these children, however, serve as a metonym for the growth of a particularly Western patriarchal culture. The characteristics of the concept to which this metonym is associated are those that allow life to be lived, but also to flourish in a particular kind of way. The patriarchy is sure, it is the rock upon which the epochs of modernity are built—the modernity of the past, present and future. The patriarchal foundation is strengthened by its continued historical existence, and by its perseverance in the face of struggles, both collective and individual. These struggles are those that threaten the stability of patriarchal culture, and, circling back to the metonym, the stability of the family, of the individual, of the growing child.

As the child, the growing child, is a metonym for culture, the nourishment of the child is culture’s progress. The mother, then, is as much the caretaker of cultural stability as she is of her child’s well-being. As the child grows, so changes the ways in which the
child, the individual, requires nourishment, and so, too, the ways in which the mother nourishes. The mother is always present in the mind of the child as nurturer, and, therefore, her role in the growth of the child, of the individual, is forever linked to the growth of culture. This link hints at a particular kind of intimacy, one that is perpetually romanticized as the ideal relationship. It is unconditional connection that individuals have with their mothers, and that mothers have with culture; and this connection is more than simply one that exists within the walls of the family home.

In twentieth century literature no theme has been more celebrated than the growth of the individual. The conflicts that pervade many protagonists’ journeys are those that challenge the identity, morality, and meaning of that individual—his and her struggle to attain a sense of self. As the growth of the individual has been literature’s struggle to understand and describe the changes of and within culture, the mother has remained present, either in her direct role in the individual’s struggle or in her absence from it. In this way, she has remained the source of struggle, as she has remained in constant relation to the individual struggling. While her role as source often times remains abstract from the text, sometimes only for the pen of the critic to pull out and hint at, her role as a source of a particular kind has currents in many texts. With the theme of individual growth in the literature of the twentieth century, the mother’s role as a source reveals something inherent to this literature and the ways in which it deals with individual growth, as well as something inherent to the ways in which it, and culture, characterizes the mother.

The particular kind of source that the mother is characterized as, and the source by which this thesis identifies her, is the source of desire. For it is in the theme of
individual growth that we see individuals struggling with the individuality of their motivations to keep living, and to keep living individually in relation to that which makes them most human and un-individual: desire. This struggle to grow into something, into someone, with a unique identity and with original characteristics is thrown into fatal contention with the desire to just be human. Therefore, as the theme of desire is that which the individual perpetually struggles against—he and she attempt to exist outside of their repetitive, desirous human natures—the ways in which the individual requires nourishment, requires growth, unalterably brings into the struggle the nourishing that the mother does.

Just as the relationship of nourishment between mother and child changes with the needs of the child as the child individually grows, the desire that constitutes the nature of the individual changes. However, this change is not one of linear progression over an individual life. It is not change in a similar sense; rather, it is the change present in the desire from one individual to another. Looking at the different desires that each individual has, and looking at them in relation to the desires of other individuals, does not expose a development of desire as much as it exposes the different ways desire exists within different individuals and the different relationships that exist between the child individually growing and the child’s mother because of desire.

While it might seem intuitive to talk about individuals growing, and even intuitive to talk about such growing as a major theme in twentieth century literature, to talk about desire as having this kind of effect on the individual becomes messy, because there is not necessarily a growth or progression in any comprehensible and comparable sense to be pinpointed and collectively talked about. Yet, if we turn away from simply examining
the desire of the individual through individual growth, and examine desire through the relationship of the individual with the mother, just as we can examine the nourishment of the child through the nourishing mother, we begin to see desire as a relationship itself. It is the meeting ground of how the child desires the mother and how the mother either fulfills or abandons those desires.

What this language then becomes when looking at desire as it exists in the relationship between the individual and the mother is the relationship of desire between mother and child. That is, there are three ways, in three different literary texts, that this thesis talks about desire differently, all of which are in relation to the mother. As we begin to talk about the mother and about desire in this way, the term devour also becomes very useful. To devour, in this sense, is the mother’s overcompensation of the child’s desiring of her. It is her entrenchment as nurturer, her devouring of herself as the one being desired because she is that which is desired. It is her consumption of the individual that desires her—the child individually growing. Furthermore, this distinction between desire and devour helps to clarify the different ways that each individual in each of the three literary texts to be discussed is characterized by their relationship of desire.

The first model of desire is that which exists when the individual desires the mother in a way that his desire is not entirely consumed, or devoured, by the mother, but nor is the mother completely, perhaps incestuously, desired. In Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator, Marcel, exhibits his desiring nature that dances on the line of desiring and devouring. As a child and adolescent, his desire is attached to the mother in a way that it is facilitated in outward expression—he develops a maternal ethic that constitutes his outlook of the world around him. But this desire that facilitates his
outlook often suffers the consequences of being devoured. That it is not entirely
devoured, however, and that the desire of his youth perpetuates to the end, even as he
struggles against being devoured by the maternal (not just his mother, but by the
maternity present in the women around him, and by the maternity eventually present in
him), intimates at the effects of the mother as source in both desiring the mother and
being devoured by her, without exhibiting the extremes of either. Looking through this
lens of desire, one sees a grey tint of either/or that characterizes Marcel’s relationship to
his mother as this source.

While desire in Proust’s novel locates itself both in a mother, in a maternal, that is
desired and that devours, avoiding the extremes of one or the other, Gabriel Garcia
Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* displays a mother characterized by her
overwhelming nature as devourer. Because of the other-worldly, yet worldly,
possibilities inherent in Marquez’s magically realistic fiction, the matriarch of the family
lives on through generations of her children’s children, and their children’s children. As
such, she devours the desire not of a single individual, but of individuals singularly
connected through name and lineage, supplanting even external cultural pressures as she
lives on, just so that she may sustain her family through her role as nurturer. The
succession of Jose Buendias that move into the role of pseudo-patriarch in an
overwhelmingly matriarchal household, then move out in their own individual ways
toward something—an identity, perhaps—but also away from something else—the
devouring mother. This signals the consumption of each of their individual desires; that
is, their desire to be nurtured, and, as they develop, nurtured in a changing way, is
consumed by the nurturer, as the mother is so fixed in her role as mother, as nurturer and
caretaker of the generational succession of Jose Buendias, that the individuals desiring her nurturing cannot alter their position as nurtured in relation to the nurturer, they cannot grow—because time is a concern of their mortality and not hers’, they enter into the world being devoured by her ensconced role and leave it in the same way.

Where Proust’s and Marquez’s fill their novels with maternal images and characters, John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* lacks a mother as a substantial character, offering no maternal ideal. The lack of the mother in Steinbeck situates her as the source of desire because the maternal presence, in its absence, remains the always absent object. The allegorical brothers from Genesis, Caleb and Aron, are raise in a world of men where the paternal ideal is always present. This all-present paternity and textual absence of a constant maternal figure cultivate a literary environment in which small, subtle actions of the two brothers hint at the larger desire present underneath the paternalistic shroud. The absence of the mother for the brothers drives and defines their desires, thus making the absent mother as significant as the complete, textually embodied brothers are themselves. She is as influential in significant for the relationship of desire as the paternal is. The maternal ideal in Steinbeck occupies the extreme that Proust’s maternal avoids in either direction and that Marquez’s exists entirely opposite from. The mother is that which is most desired because she is not there; and because the nurturing that is desired early on is literally abandoned by the brothers’ biological mother, the desire for nourishment not only pervades individual desire, but perpetuates it entirely.

What this thesis will do is find within three different twentieth century novels three different currents of desire that flow from the same source, the mother. Each novel is discussed separately with regard to how each of the individuals relate to the maternal,
and how the maternal, differently characterized as the source of desire as the maternal is differently characterized in, or left absent from, each novel, is separately but collectively the source from which our discussion and analysis of desire flows. While the majority of this essay moves to bring out the images of the mother as the desired or the devourer, the concluding section offers a critique on the notion that the mother can be depicted as this source to begin with. That is, the picture of the mother in culture, in twentieth century culture, that these novels similarly paint characterize a maternal that also affords, after each of these characterizations is drawn out, the possibility of critiquing the same patriarchal culture that produces this literature and the potential for realizing the maternal as source, because this possibility reflects the ways in which those things that threaten the stability of the family, of the nourishment of the child and individual, are often times the first to be critiqued by culture for their ostensibly inherent undermining qualities and cultural shortcomings.
CHAPTER II.
PROUST AND THE MATERNAL ETHIC

In Proust’s sweeping novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, we are given insight into the memory of the writer through the memory of the child. We also experience the struggles of the individual narrator as they occurred—in thoughts, scenes, reflections of scenes, relationships, and reflections on relationships—and as they impacted the emotional life of the individual. While there is certainly evidence of twentieth century literature’s focus on the individual, there is also evidence in and from these individual struggles of how an individual’s ethic is first formed and then exercised in life. From the stories and memories of how individuals interact with each other, comes the narrator’s, Marcel’s, story of his ethical perspective. This moral education, however, is not conducted by the instruction of distinct, premeditated lessons; rather, it is learned by a combination of failures, sufferings, and loving successes. And as the framework of these lessons mirrors the framework of desire, in that they both progress by repetition, the leap from one to the other is not so great. This is especially the case in Proust, as Marcel’s ethical perspective is formed and continually informed by a maternal ethic, just as the source of his desire is too the maternal.
In Proust, the maternal is not a solidified character. She is comprised of a complex set of discursive personalities, and a different set of characters, which drive the plot (the growth of the individual), but which also cause the terror of emptiness at the end of the road of desire. The complexity of her character offsets the patriarchal scheme set forth in other literature. If she were to provide a singular voice or image, even a strong one, she would remain within a singular context. She would be that which cannot be removed from the home unless the home was to be removed altogether. And so Marcel is inexplicably linked to his, the narrator’s, relationship with his mother and with the maternal around him. The memories that Marcel revisits move back so as to relinquish his failed desires- to replace them, with a fulfillment through memory that is far enough distanced from the past so as to deplete a realization of the inevitable lack that constitutes the present of the past, but also close enough to the past so as to fill the memory of those past experiences with a discursive fulfillment of those desires. By reliving the desires of the past, Proust, through the narrator Marcel, is able to live presently in the history of his own desires, of his own self; Marcel the child moves through the text to become Marcel the writer about to write this book. And, yet, the mother represents the close proximity to the original source of those desires as well as the closest threat to those desires. That is, the mother (both her, and the image of her) is what he desires most, but also that which consumes his desire most as he begins to show those characteristics he recognizes as the maternal toward the other and toward himself.

To understand the link of repetition between Marcel’s maternal ethic and the source of his desire as the maternal, before jumping into an analysis of either, the framework for both of them, the nature of repetition in each, must be laid out. Doing so,
however, requires us only to look with a detailed eye at the structure of one of them, desire, as it will sufficiently provide the tools to analyze both. The particular framework of desire that this thesis uses is that which is articulated by theorist Leo Bersani in his work *A Future for Astynax*.

For Bersani, desire is the endless repetition which constructs a history of satisfaction and of lack, constituting the personal, identifiable history of a structure, conscious self. In the construction of history and the structuring of a self, repetition is the grease for the wheels of progression. It is crucial to note too that repetition takes such a prominent constructing and structuring role because it is that which enables a conscious self to consciously live with certain lacks and cherish certain satisfactions of desire in such a way that desire is subject to the individual and not the other way around. By structured desire, Bersani means the “desiring impulses sublimated into emotional ‘faculties’ or passions and thereby providing the basis for the notion of a distinct and coherently unified personality” (5). For our framework of repetition, the key term here is sublimated. Bersani works hard to distinguish sublimation from repression for a particular reason, and for our purposes, we should too. That desire is not repressed means that it is not simply held in an unhealthy storage tank of unhealthy emotions and un-fulfillments for the sake of conscious coherency with the potential of exploding at any incoherent moment. That desire is sublimated means that desire, the consequences of both satisfaction and lack, is still present, that it is necessary for a historically constructed self. Bersani writes as much:

A sense both of the forbidden nature of certain desires and of the incompatibility of reality with our desiring imagination makes the negation of desire inevitable.
But to deny desire is not to eliminate it; in fact, such denials multiply the appearances of each desire in the self’s history. In denying a desire, we condemn ourselves to finding it everywhere. Repressed desire is repeated, disguised and sublimated. Its reappearances in various forms at different levels of mental life create the intelligible structures, the psychic continuities which can be formulated as an individual’s personality or character. The disguised repetitions of inhibited desires constitute the coherent self (6).

In the same way that our structured, desiring selves are structured and historically constructed out of the repetition of similar scenes, of similar satisfactions and lacks, so too are our structured, conscious ethical selves constructed and perpetuated out of parallel repeated scenes. The nature of desire, of the desire that gives us personality and identity, is repetition. The reappearance of scenes of satisfaction and of lack, as well as of scenes of ethical agreement and disagreement reaffirm the personalities with which we identify and the identities that we personify. It is from this framework of repetition that Proust’s maternal ethic emerges.

In that repetition is precisely that which is repeated, Proust’s novel is a fictive reenactment of childhood memories and scenes; it is a novel of repetition. The repetition, though, is more than just repeating scenes through memory. It is the fictive remembering of scenes that are repeated throughout childhood. As Marcel grows older, cultivates new relationships, and rekindles old relationships in new ways, the same struggles and expectations of what he wants in relationships and from people exists throughout. What he wants, what he desires, is not a relationship with a particular individual or type of individual, but the particular meaning that he has experienced in his relationships with
particular people—the love and empathy he first experiences from and with the mother. The characteristics of the mother, however, are not simply those that belong to his mother alone, or to actual mothers; it is that which he first experienced with his mother—her nurturing and his nourishment—that comes to define the maternity that he desires. The maternal characters in the narrator’s life too comprise the scenes and the motherly nature that forms and informs the idea of the mother and of the mother-child relationship expressed throughout his growth.

While the narrative of the novel transitions between a story that moves forward as Marcel grows older and one that reflects on the scenes in front of and the ideas around him such that it is a book of images and ideas often times more than it is a book of characters doing things, the character of the mother and of the maternal is solidified early on. That the struggle from the first line entangles a young Marcel with maternal love and care moves him into a relationship with the maternal that never untangles. Marcel, the child, desires his mother’s goodnight kiss, a kiss representative of her nature and her nurturing of him (Proust 13). Without her, and without her love, he cannot and he will not fall asleep to the world of his dreams. The moment of her kiss is one that he both fears and desires more than anything, because as he needs it to sleep, to dream, he knows the moment will also end. The desire and, therefore, the significance of the maternal do not simply live in the moments when the figure of the mother is present.

But this goodnight lasted so short a time, she went down again so soon, that the moment when I heard her coming up, then the soft sound of her garden dress of blue muslin, hung with little cords of plaited straw, passing along the hallway with its double doors, was for me a painful one. It heralded the moment that was
to follow it, when she had left me, when she had gone down again. So that I came
to wish that this goodnight I loved so much would take place as late as possible,
so as to prolong the time of respite in which Mama had not yet come (13).

The maternal presence in Marcel, even as a child, is no shroud of youthful
dependence; it is a kernel of truth inside him, growing in significance with each caress of
love and empathic acknowledgment. The struggle from these first lines, however, is not
one just of desiring, but also of being devoured. This scene, like the mother’s dress
lightly draping down the hallway, heralds the coming of a maternal presence that devours
Marcel, bringing him into the maternal presence as much, in some ways, as his mother is
from the very beginning.

As a child still, Marcel’s desire for his mother’s presence extends beyond wanting
her kisses to wanting what other maternal characters in his life ethically desire. It is this
ethical empathy, this moral education, too that brings Marcel himself into the maternal
presence. As his grandmother’s love for his grandfather is a love and care similar to that
which Marcel’s mother loves and cares for him (she nurtures the individual as he requires
nourishment), when his grandmother’s nurturing is rejected or besmirched, Marcel feels
the pain in her dismissed maternity. There is a scene early in the novel, when the
maternal influence on the narrator is quickly staking its claim, where his grandmother
attempts to keep his grandfather from drinking more than is good for his health. But
when the mocking invocations of Marcel’s aunt encourage his grandfather to dismiss his
grandmother’s pleas, Marcel witnesses and experiences a crushing blow to the maternity
around him (12).
Yet, from this scene, something more comes to light. Not only does Marcel weep because his grandmother fails to carry out her nurturing role, but also, as Inge Wimmers writes, “because he fails to help her, which makes him feel guilty for avoiding the scene altogether by fleeing upstairs” (Wimmers 154). He too suffers an ethical loss, a loss of the nurturing inherent in the maternal. Because his grandfather dismisses his grandmother’s wishes, her love and care for him, Marcel weeps at the dismissal of loving nourishment; and because he loves and cares for his grandmother in a similar, maternal way, Marcel weeps for having failed to aid his grandmother—as she fails to care for her husband, Marcel fails to care for her.

Marcel’s empathy for his grandmother, and more precisely for the maternal she represents, echoes throughout the remainder of the volumes of the novel, reflectively cherishing moments of motherly love and care, disdaining moments of unfounded judgment and emotional despondency. As his life grows and his relationships complicate, the maternal presence does not disseminate into other characters in the novel as much as it ruminates and develops within him. It is this internal, maternal development that signals not simply the source of the mother as desired, but also her, the maternal, as devouring. This becomes particularly evident in Marcel’s relationship with Albertine. Albertine is outside the family, but she is not outside the love that exists within it. The love that nourishes, that is embodied in the mother’s kiss and the grandmother’s prescriptive temperance to her husband, is the love that fills Marcel as he falls in love with Albertine. When, however, there relationship falls to pieces the maternal care and affection that first provided meaning for his love for her becomes the model by which he comforts himself. Marcel, “all alone and feeling totally bereft, calls
on maternal discourse for comfort (he reassures himself with the words his mother used to comfort his grandmother), that is, he mothers himself in this kind of emotional dédoublement where he is at once his suffering self and his consoling mother” (154). The maternal is both desired and devouring. He suffers because of a lack unfilled in Albertine leaving, and longs for that which is first represented in the mother’s kiss. At the same time, he becomes mother to himself and is devoured by the maternal, consuming the lack left by Albertine with his presence in the maternal, as his own maternal presence.

The emotional dédoublement in relation to the maternal of which Wimmers writes is the either/or, the both/and that Proust’s novel embodies. The struggles that Marcel the writer recalls and relives in Marcel the growing individual are navigated with the discourse of the maternal and are interpreted with the perspective of the maternal ethic. To be loved and cared for as he is as a child is not something he grows out of, and the nourishment required from this particular growing individual does not change in what he desires. It changes with the increasing significance of the maternal on and in him. Marcel does not transition from a child desiring to an individual maternally devouring; he embraces both of them as parts, as the maternal part, of his own identity. And so as the maternal ethic in which Marcel is raised is that which he individually, ethically embraces—through repetition of scenes and relationships, “the narrator emphasizes the maternal bond that is at the very root of his sentimental education” (155)— the desire within the novel, within the individual, finds its source in the maternal. Any movement in reflection, in individual growth, in external expression is located in relation to the maternal (that which is most desired and that which devours everything else) such that
the cultivation of the novel’s particular individual through his desires is a cultivation eternally linked to desires’ source: the mother.
CHAPTER III.
MARQUEZ’S DEVOURING MOTHER

Carl Jung’s articulation of the mother archetype is significant to the analysis of the maternal represented in Marquez’s *One Hundred years of Solitude*. In the first sense, the mythological and magical sources from which Jung draws the symbols of the mother archetype, symbols that he argues can be translated into symbols present in reality, remain in their mythological and magical state in Marquez’s magical realism. As one scholar writes about the uses of magical realism, “the magical text operates virtually as a corrective to traditional tenets of mimesis, incorporating those unreal elements which in themselves antithetically ground reality” (Simpkins 144). The invisible nature of desire and intimacy and relationships is supplemented into elongated, fictionally strung-out depictions of reality, where the unreal world of the characters is real to us because the unreal, unstructured nature of our consciousness is always the consciousness of magical realist characters. In the second sense, those qualities which, in their original mythological and magical way, evoke the real relations involved in the mother-child relationship, specifically the quality of devouring, are most obvious in and because of the extreme setting of Marquez’s novel. As Jung writes of the archetype:
The qualities associated with it are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided over by the mother. One the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate (Jung 139).

The characterization that this description offers presents a maternal that is universally goddess-like while locally very like the mother in the home, the mother that nurturers the child. The maternal brings life, with all of its exuberance, into being and brings death, will all of its perturbation, into finality. The maternal characters in Marquez’s fiction transcend the realm of the novel in which the other, non-maternal characters exist. One transcends time, devouring generations of her relatives. The other transcends life in time, devouring the desires of men who attempt to love her.

Because Marquez’s novel is a book of extremes veiled in the subtleties of magic, what we cannot conceive of in this reality seems so real to us in Marquez’s world. The language of Macando, of the Buedias’s reality, talks in the most romantic and devastating of tongues. But because these extremes never venture too climatically away from one another, and because even the most romantic and devastating of ideals present in the book are still ones we experience in reality, even if only in our dreams, these polarized images offer the chance for critical insight and reflection, especially for our purposes here.
While Marquez’s novel is filled with an array of characters, it is not the characters themselves that move the narrative along. The motivations that drive each character, though, there are at times different causes and effects that many characters seem to respond to or against, appear more predetermined than premeditated or reactionary. And so, just as the butterflies represent more of a symbol of swarming love, overflowing hearts, and disease-like desire than they do of swaths of creatures in nature, each character carries with him or her the weight of the symbolic themes that fill the lines and paint the pictures of the novel. There is, then, no single individual as there is in Proust that experiences the struggles of individual growth and from which desire in relation to the mother exists. However, that there is no single individual does not mean that there is no single representation of individual growth. The generational span of Jose Buendias, with variations on the name through the generational lines, embodies a similar, if not in many ways the same, individual as he adorns his many different faces to meet the changes around him. This lineage also keeps alive the struggle for identity, not subjecting it to the fate of time necessarily, but using time to mark change, difference, loss, and death against a backdrop of those who live beyond time’s borders.

One character that does not fit into this analysis is the mother, Ursula Buendia. There are no variations of her character in other characters through the seven generations, because she lives for six of them. Her individuality is not marked by time, as she lives beyond its strict borders. Another character that does not fit into this analysis but not in the same temporal manner as Ursula is Remedios the Beauty. Where Ursula carries the maternal throughout time, Remedios carries it in time, but in her unrecognized relation to it. Both of these characters, while very much existing in the current of Marquez’s writing
exists outside, in their own individual ways, of the collectivity of the novel’s other characters. That is, although Ursula is the mother, the first mother, and Remedios never actually mother’s a child, the mother archetype is clearly visible in each of them—particularly, the characteristic of the mother archetype that devours is the symbolic theme that burdens each of them.

The devouring nature of Ursula Beundia begins with her fixed, a temporal position as the matriarch in a family of finite characters. This all and always present characteristic affords Ursula’s character infinite space within Marquez’s Macando to become the ultimate, unequivocal mother. Both outside of the city’s boundaries, to the world beyond, and inside the city itself, to the world within, Ursula’s maternal perpetuates life where the paternal has tried but failed. After her husband, Jose Arcadio Buendia, Macando’s founding patriarch, fails to find his visionary route to the sea, the path leading to the city’s cultivation of growth and progress, Ursula, motivated only by the worry and devotion of a mother in search of her run-away child, finds it, inconsequentially (Marquez 36). And when the wealth from that very progress threatens to overwhelm the stability of the family—it’s rationality; the walls of the house in which they live—Ursula, having far exceeded her expected maternal duties and earned time to enjoy her own individual life, from the small boutique she begins more as a hobby than a thriving city business, saves the Buendia family, even Macando itself, from ruin:

Ursula fought to preserve common sense in that extravagant house, having broadened her business of little candy animals with an oven that went all night turning out baskets and more baskets of bread and a prodigious variety of puddings, meringues, and cookies, which disappeared in a few hours on the roads
winding through the swamp. She had reached an age where she had a right to rest, but she was nonetheless more and more active (53).

Her small, domestic business, an extension of her maternal efforts, becomes the profits that furnish the Buendia mansion, fund the Buendia dynasty, and insure every generation of Buendia’s with weight in gold to their family name.

When looking, then, at the growth of characters in relation to the maternal Ursula, not only do they enter into a world to the ends of which she has conquered and saved (finding the path to the sea beyond, saving the city with her little, oven candies within) but into which she actively pursues her maternal nature, living on through six generations to continue fulfilling her maternal duties. Even though there is no single character that the novel follows, the generational succession of Buendias, with variations on the name of Jose Arcadio or Jose Aureliano, or simply the latter part of each of those names, provides a succession of paternal characters each, like their names, with similar desires that are devoured by the maternally conquered world around them and the active maternal presence continually nurturing them. Ursula transcends time, living nearly a century and a half in order to continue mothering. The succession of paternal characters never allows for the fulfillment of a single patriarchal role, and never can the Buendia family nor the citizens of Macondo look with reassurance at the Buendia House for paternal guidance. After the first father, Jose Arcadio Buendia, cannot find the route to the sea, after a life spent tinkering away in his alchemy lab searching for the great invention of his time, he slides away into living death, into eternal solitude. With the failure of his final attempted invention, the time machine, his last paternal act is to destroy the lab which only the paternal had entered. In one last act of violence, he, the
founder of Macondo, is rendered incoherent and insane, innocent and childlike, yielding to the caresses of his wife, the great mother of the city, of his people, and now, of him: “When Urula and Amaranda returned he was still tied to the trunk of the chestnut tree by his hands and feet, soaked with rain and in a state of total innocence” (78). It is only Ursula who dares to approach the once-great-man-turned-child: “Ursula untied his wrists and ankles, lacerated by the pressure of the rope, and left him tied only by the waist. Later on they built him a shelter of palm branches to protect him from the sun and the rain” (78). She leaves her husband tied to the tree, more comfortably than before, so that she may keep watch over him, nurture him, and so that another of her children will not run away with gypsies to some far off land.

Unlike Ursula, Remedios the Beauty is fixed within time. Her maternal nature is not all consuming to six of the seven generations of her family. She is not identifiable as the ultimate, unequivocal mother of the Buendia family and of Macando. Her maternal nature exists in her being the most desired of all women in Macando and her unacknowledged devouring of it, of those that desire her. From her conception, she is predicted to be a creature unlike any other: “Even from the time when she was in her mother’s womb, she was safe from any contagion” (172). In that she is a creature of eternal innocence, she too requires nourishment, but not nourishment from the maternal, from Ursula. Her beauty, while appearing most beautiful to the men of her world, exists in her constant innocence. She is the personification of the smoothness of the wind, of the sweet smell of roses, of the taste of desire. Each movement she makes is one exercised with purity—a pureness of heart and a pureness of naivety.
In the world around her, however, she is the most desired of beings. Her presence like the smell of her innocence sucks the wells of men’s desire dry: “She gave off a breath of perturbation, a tormenting breeze that was still perceptible several hours after she had passed by” (237). She is the living goddess of which Jung writes. Her naivety is her secret, and her endless beauty is her abyss. Compounded together, she is a creature of delicacy and of poison. The life she lives not only devours men’s hearts and desires; it devours their lives when they come to close to the source. On one occasion, a man sneaks onto the roof of the room in which Remedios the Beauty is bathing, and overcome by the pureness of her body falls to his death:

The foreigners who heard the noise in the dining room and hastened to remove the body noticed the suffocating odor of Remedios the Beauty on his skin. It was so deep in his body that the cracks of his skull did not give off blood but an amber-colored oil that was impregnated with that secret perfume, and then they understood that the smell of Remedios the Beauty kept torturing men beyond death, right down to the dust of their bones (233).

Remedios the Beauty evokes the maternal not because she is mother, but because she is most desired, and because she is most desired as she embodies the magical nature of the mother archetype. That she is not an active practitioner of her own beauty she is not simply the most beautiful woman about town. She brings men back to their most primitive, most human state. They lose all sight of the world around them. Life and death mean nothing in the sight of Remedios the Beauty. She transcends the character of the most beautiful and enters the realm of the maternal. But that she is not the woman
about town, that she is not a woman of this world but the woman embodiment of the maternal goddess, she devours men’s desires.

Marquez gives us a world in which the role of women, of the maternal, is magically exaggerated. In its exaggeration, however, the devouring nature of the maternal becomes most clear. Between Ursula’s all-encompassing, time transcending motherhood and Remedios the Beauty’s intensely pure, enshrouding naivety, we are given a particular picture of the mother as source. She is the source of the most desired so much so that she encompasses and enshrouds all that she nourishes and all that looks upon her. She devours the paternalistic desires of men, turning patriarchs into children and gazing lovers into lifeless, tortured skeletons.
CHAPTER IV.

STEINBECK AND THE MOTHER DESIRED

_East of Eden_ is a book about family. It is a story about the growth and decline, the prosperity and struggle, the love and hate, and the life and death that compose the life of the individuals that comprise the family. As the first pages of Steinbeck’s novel inscribes the story to be told onto the land on which it occurs, the ebb and flow of humanity’s most instinctive and primitive struggle—to choose a life by living it, rather than to live one already decided—is inscribed into the story of the characters, of the families, that fill the novel’s pages. But Steinbeck’s story is one of family, of the individuals in family, from and about men. The family is birthed out of man’s conquests, both his victories and his failures; and it dies from much of the same. However, in that it is a story from and about men, the position of women in the novel is significant. The significance of women in the novel, though, is not due to their quantity of appearance, but to the quality of their appearance on the outskirts of importance. That is, while the story begins, is filled, and ends with men (it is, perhaps in one sense, a bildungsroman of men in family), the eyes of desire of these men never cease looking upon the horizon of what is rarely present: the woman; the mother. In this way, then, _East of Eden_ can be read as a story about men without, but desiring, women. It is Adam wanting Eve.
Steinbeck’s story too is poignantly set in the Biblical framework of Genesis, the story of creation. It is crucial to note, however, that the story of creation, of the ultimate first, is not one simply of physical creation; it is the story of all creations—of sadness, joy, and desire, just as it is of rain, sunshine, and fruit. So while *East of Eden* is the story of one family’s creation, from the settling of land to the birth of children and to the death of the patriarch, it is also a story of the un-fulfillment of the first desire: the desire of the mother. After Cathy Trask realizes her unhappiness with her life, with her savior-husband Adam and her children Caleb and Aron, and after her flight from home, the children are raised in a world of men by men, without their mother. The mother that they never have is replaced by the father that is always present. But the mother is never replaced. She is always that which is never there but is always desired.

As part of his Genesis retelling, Steinbeck does more than write a novel of creation. He gives us all of the seeds out of which everything is created—good and evil, love and lust, life and death. So in his Eden too there is the source of evil, that which when chosen causes one to fall out of grace and into sin, the source of desire. We are first introduced to Cathy Trask as Cathy Aimes, a creature not of this world, a creature to whom everyone else seems monstrous because she is so herself:

She was not like other people, never was from birth. And just as a cripple may learn to utilize his lack so that he become more effective in a limited field than the uncrippled, so did Cathy, using her difference, make a painful and bewildering stir in her world…There was a time when a girl like Cathy would have been called possessed by the devil… she would have been burned as a witch for the
good of the community. The one thing that may not be forgiven a witch is her ability to distress people, to make them restless and uneasy and even envious (Steinbeck 72).

Cathy is both Eve and the serpent of evil in Steinbeck’s Eden. Her purity is in her natural ability to pull others not like her (and the others in the novel are men) into the world of envy and coveting and out of the world of their natural and free selves. She is Eve because she is the woman, the woman from whom humanity is birthed. But she is also the serpent because her evilness is her nature, her own natural inclination.

From the very beginning, Cathy is set at a distance. She remains on the horizon to be always longed and never fully understood. There is a pulling about her that defines the relationships of which she is a part. Those that love her take great leaps not in order to show their love for her, but to fulfill their wanting to be loved by her. Adam, who picks her up off the street back East, saving her from the brothel by giving her both food and shelter as well as monogamy, takes his inherited fortune and his new bride out West. He yearns to start a new life, to build a home and a family, to create his garden of creation and be loved. His love for Cathy pulls him along; it pulls him to the Salinas Valley, to the wealthiest tract of land in the region, until eventually he has his home, his children, and his family. He does not have, however, Cathy. She remains distant and always to be desired. When she leaves their paradise, then, with the quickness of the gunshot that pierces her husband’s shoulder, she solidifies her position of distance and returns to the periphery, to live on the horizon always desired.
Her relationship with Adam is not the only relationship where this desire is evident. In the rearing of her children, Caleb and Aron, she is never present. The boys grow up without their mother. They are raised in a world of men by the ideals of men. But as they grow into men, as Caleb and Aron develop into their distinct Cain and Abel personas, they never grow out of their childhood without their mother. Though they do not always actively acknowledge this lack of motherhood, they are always living in relation to it. For, as Adrienne Rich writes, “the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of *dependence on a woman for life itself*; the son’s constant effort to assimilate, compensate for, or deny the fact that he is ‘of woman born’” (Rich 11). Even after Caleb, the son who feels his father’s love least, find his mother Cathy, turned Kate the brother owner, years later, he is neither fulfilled nor satisfactorily mothered. His desire to be mothered compounds with his desire to be acknowledged by his father as his brother Aron is, going so far as to show Aron the life of debauchery and sin into which their mother has fallen, using it as a weapon against him. That is, the sibling battle that erupts between the two spills over into their desire to know their mother because it begins with their original un-fulfilled desire to be mothered. Adam cannot love his sons enough. He cannot love and nurture his sons in the way that their mother can but, because she was and is not there, does not.

The mother in Steinbeck’s novel is a mother always on the horizon. She is a mother that is always longed for, always desired. The struggles that arise in the Eden of the Salinas Valley in one sense are due to the clashes of conscience, the clashes of true, free will and choice—men creating a world and choosing how to live individually in it. In another sense, though, the struggles that arise in Eden spring out of the well that is
always dry, and yet always remains a well that can and should, so the men think, provide water: the well of desire. In this way, then, this desire, embodied first in the pulling nature of Cathy Ames and eventually in the absent mother of Cathy Trask, is the cause of struggle. The mother is the source that is never attained. The longer she remains absent, absent from the Salinas Valley, absent from motherhood, the more she is desired.
CHAPTER V.

CONCLUDING CRITIQUE: WE ARE BORN OF WOMEN

We live in a culture of patriarchal dominance. The literature we write and read like the families we raise and are raised from exist always because of and in relation to patriarchal structures. The language we use even to talk and think about the elements that compose the historical and present culture in which we live ebb and flow with the tides of patriarchy’s discourse. That is, to think about anything in culture is to think about how it is categorically held within culture. The fertile ground that allows for any discussion of the mother to take root is tilled with the power of the historically justified plow and fertilized with the confidence of continually present cultural seeds—the present is perpetually reinforced as the past grows larger into history and the future is forged empirically from it.

The position of the mother that has been laid out in this thesis is one where she is intimately linked to the child-individual, to the development of the individual and of his most human of qualities, and to the growth and sustainment of the family—patriarchal culture’s progress. However, this position also begets the potential of the mother as the first to be critiqued. She is the ultimate nurturer, the great bearer of life, the darkness from which we first see the light of the world. Culture’s existence depends on the
mother’s ability to raise her child. This cultural burden has impressed the mother into the characteristics that define the position of her motherhood. But does the nature of the mother, of motherhood, necessarily assume those characteristics and critical conventions by which the patriarchal structure defines it? Or is the mother’s position as the first to be critiqued begotten by patriarchy’s inability to understand and explain her mystery, the mystery that allows her to individually champion and cherish these intimacies?

In her book *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich paints a theoretical picture of the mother within our patriarchal culture that I will end with. It is a picture that has been repainted and touched up by the heavy hues of history more times than can be counted, but beneath the layers, Rich still sees the tint of those colors that strike us most. Her exposition of the mystery of motherhood sometimes juxtaposed to, other times entrapped by, patriarchal culture serves up the possibility for an answer to why the mother can be both written about and understood as she is in this thesis—as the source of desire.

Rich argues that patriarchy is founded on the premise that all things exist in the state of a duality (Rich 116). The sun is to the moon what light is to darkness, what birth is to death, what water is to land. The duality has been understood from a patriarchal consciousness that at once holds the particular characteristics of female and mother distinct from those of male and father and, because it is a consciousness within the patriarchal structure, contains female and mother characteristics only in relation to what can be known of male and father characteristics. Whereas Rich points to scholars who have argued that pre-patriarchal consciousness “begins with an elemental unity which is still presided over by a female presence” (Rich 116), the elements understood in patriarchal consciousness are separate but perceived as inherent. That is, the mother is
perceived only in as much as she inherently is. Her mystery is her contained and understandible difference, her role, in patriarchal culture.

The duality of patriarchy understands the world through the dichotomy of those things that are inherent (inherently good) and those things that must be conquered—those mysteries that must be explicated. That the potentiality of life exists in the female, making her the always-potential-mother, and not in the male (his life-making capabilities exist externally and unchanging) creates a contrast that the patriarchal consciousness has structurally demystified and rationally re-mystified. This contrast distinguishes itself in language, in that to father a child is to implant the female egg with the male sperm, whereas to mother a child is an action that is continually acted out by carrying and constantly nurturing the child—the act of weaning the adolescent-adult from childhood nourishment is an act of nourishment just as significant as breast feeding a newborn. The father, in a moment, fathers his child. The mother, for a lifetime, mothers her’s. And so while the mother is “safely caged in a simple aspect of her being—the maternal—she remains on object of mistrust, suspicion, misogyny in both overt and insidious forms” (Rich 127). The intimacy between mother and child is no longer the intimacy between the individual mother and her own child. It is the inherent characteristic of the mother-child relationship, a relationship that is at once the quotidian relationship and at once the foundation of patriarchal culture. The personal that is the intimate is objectified to signify what the mother is, washing away the language that allows her relationship with her child to be her own.

While this thesis has analyzed the role of the mother in culture through the medium of literature (first by looking at what she is and second by examining how she
has come to be) there is something beneath all of this that matters more. In every one of
these arguments, from Proust to Rich, the mother has remained the signifier for the
battleground of gender. But does the mother that lays her child to bed, when kissing him
goodnight, when living with him in motherly intimacy, concern herself with her cultural
role? I think not. None of these postulations illuminate the significance of the goodnight
kiss. They only burden those that are intimate with the weight of cultural expectations.
The metonym of the growing child, embodied in the mother-child relationship, signifies
culture’s progress, but it does not signify how the intimacy is felt in the room of
relationships. Nothing can stand in place of the mother’s kiss. Discussions and
definitions can only burden those touching. And to bring intimacy into this theoretical
discussion would only serve to tarnish the real connections we have between us. My
argument for the mother is not for the reevaluation of all mothers or of motherhood. By
intentionally leaving intimacy aside, it is an argument for letting intimacy remain
intimate and personal between those that feel each other’s kisses and touches and glances
and thoughts. It is an argument for letting intimacy remain pure for the mother that
mothers, the father that fathers, the sister that sisters, and the lovers that love.
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