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The Daughter as Escape Artist

Sue Ann Johnston
University of British Columbia

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, V

We have long been accustomed to reading about male protagonists who long to escape the constraints of civilization and "light out for the Territory,"[1] but increasingly in twentieth century women's novels, we see heroines who leave home, hoping to create themselves anew. In a discussion of Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, Clara Thomas reports that "Women students recognize themselves in Joan with the comprehension that to 'escape,' to leave home, is a basic impulse for women, mirrored in countless heroines' stories, just as for men the complementary impulse is signified in Odysseus' dogged voyage *towards* home."[2] The distinction, I would argue, is hardly this clear: even Odysseus takes the most roundabout route imaginable back to Ithaca, never missing any booty or amorous adventures which thrust themselves on his attention. For both male and female writers, the journey away from home can easily merge with the journey toward home. The emphasis, however, may be different; for the sons of Telemakhos, urged to leave home sometimes before they are ready, the impulse in ascendancy may be a homeward one; for women, traditionally encouraged to stay at home, the driving impulse may be toward freedom—physical, spiritual, psychological.

Yet novels by comtemporary women writers show that walking out the door is no guarantee of freedom. Like Martha Quest, fictional daughters seek escape from the mother and the constricting life she represents. They rebel against the mother's way of life, often violating her taboos through sexual activity or leaving home physically "in hope that emotional separation will follow."[3] They do not go far, however, before they realize not that they cannot go home again, but that they have never left. In novels by Margaret Drabble, Margaret Atwood, and Anne Tyler, the heroines' escape from the mother becomes a search for her that is also a search for the self. In *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), *Lady Oracle* (1977), and *Earthly Possessions* (1977), journeys symbolize flight from the mother—into the arms of a man with whom separation and attachment conflicts are re-experienced. Before they can become individuals with capacity for mature dependence,[4] these heroines face the awesome task of emerging from an overly close identification with their mothers.

In all three novels, daughters struggle with self-hatred, craving the love denied them by mothers who appear cold and withholding. They continually seek self-affirmation, yet fear exposing inner selves they do not feel, at bottom, to be lovable. Clara Maugham relies on men to give her value in other peoples' eyes; Joan Foster fears that her husband will discover her "true self" embodied in her past; Charlotte longs to escape a husband's "judging gaze... that widened at learning who I really was."[5] These heroines

hunger for love, but their sense of self is so nebulous and unsure they cannot trust the love that comes.

They can, however, learn a measure of self-love through surrogate mothers upon whom they model themselves. They are attracted to qualities they find lacking in their own mothers—personal autonomy, tolerance, warmth. Even when they are primarily fantasy figures, as in *Earthly Possessions*, these surrogate mothers can suggest a range of possibilities.

With an ideal mother, it is also easier to be an ideal daughter. Just as these daughters see their mothers as inadequate, they also perceive an absurd distance between what is expected of them as daughters and how they experience themselves. Humor, a legitmate response to absurdity, seems a survival tactic for all three heroines, helping them to separate the creative, perceiving self from her role enactments. Their rueful humor may be an antidote for the kind of madness other fictional daughters experience when they step outside themselves for a long, hard look—recall Martha Quest in *Four-Gated City* or Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*. If Joan Foster can laugh at the picture of herself as unloved mothball daughter on a stage full of butterflies, perhaps she can gain the love (from the audience, from us) which she forfeits by not living up to her mother's expectations. Humor, then, may be a reply to absurdity, the mis-match between expectations and reality.

Clara Maugham, Joan Foster, and Charlotte Emory all attempt to deal with ambivalence through violent rejection of their mothers and their past. Yet in their journeys—to London and Paris, to Europe, to the American South—these heroines discover that they cannot escape the mother who is so deeply internalized. They must eventually trace their way back home, not to the omnipotent mother of infancy, but to a figure of pathos and vulnerability—in other words, a daughter, a self. While exploring the roots of the twentieth-century daughter's desire for "liberation," all three authors point toward possible avenues of feminine growth, self-knowledge, and integration.

I. *Jerusalem the Golden*

In her study of Margaret Drabble's fiction, Ellen Cronan Rose shows how Drabble, like Arnold Bennett, dramatizes the claims of the past. In her biography of Bennett, Drabble writes:

> The girl in *Jerusalem the Golden* like Bennett's first hero [Richard Larch, in *A Man From the North*], is obsessed with escape, and she too is enraptured by trains and hotels and travelling: she feels she has "a rightful place upon the departure platform" of her home town. [6]

Yet the strength of this impulse to escape testifies to the strength of internal constraints. Freedom, Drabble shows us, may be less an escape from the past than a clear-eyed confrontation of it. In a discussion of *Jerusalem the Golden*, Lee Edwards points out what Drabble adds to traditional stories outlining women's quest for independence:

> ...the vital perception that any attempt by such a character to shape a future into which she can then move must be accompanied by an equal motion back into the character's own past. This past, this network of parental expectations and social customs, cannot simply be annihilated, but must instead be re-perceived in order that, through understanding, it may lose its power to strangle.[7]

Growing up in the grimy industrial town of Northam, England, Clara Maugham bends her will upon escape. Yet, even after she manages to leave Northam on a scholarship, she feels constrained by duty to return home on vacations; because she is still unseparated from her mother,

she lives in terror that she will not summon the energy to leave again. Her hatred of Northam is a mask for her fear.

> ...She hated her home town with such violence that when she returned each vacation from university, she would shake and tremble with an ashamed and feverish fear. She hated it, and she was afraid of it, because she doubted her power to escape; even after two years in London, she still thought that her brain might go or that her nerve might snap, and that she would be compelled to return, feebly, defeated, to her mother's house.[8]

She fears the power of her mother, whose judgements can deflate her sense of worth, deflecting her from her struggle for autonomy.

At home, Clara so much expects a blank, stony indifference from her mother that she is deeply shaken when it shows "hidden chinks and faults" (p. 66). When Mrs. Maugham unexpectedly grants Clara permission to go on a school trip to Paris, Clara is dismayed. If she can see her mother as uniformly cold, she can better brace herself against the current of her mother's will.

> Because the truth was that this evidence of care and tenderness was harder to bear than any neglect, for it threw into question the whole basis of their lives together. Perhaps there was hope, perhaps all was not harsh antipathy, perhaps a better daughter might have found a way to soften such a mother. And if all were not lost, what effort, what strain, what retraced miles, what recriminations, what intolerable forgivenesses were not to be undergone? (p. 69)

It is easier to perceive the mother in strictly negative terms than to accept the limitations of a necessarily flawed love.

Paris, land of sweet, forbidden fruit, loses much of its symbolic importance with Mrs. Maugham's surprising concession. If Paris is permissible, Clara must find other testing ground for her independence. Montmartre, because forbidden, becomes her Paris to which she determines to escape alone at night. The adolescent sexual experimentation she experiences there serves to fix this adventure as a gesture of rebellion. Unconsciously, she expects punishment and is exhilarated to realize that "she had dared, and she had not been struck dead for it" (p. 83). The successful violation of taboo helps her to feel separate.

Even as a young women in London, she continually needs to reaffirm her separateness. The large Denham family attracts her because it represents the antithesis of her own—open, affectionate, tolerant, rather than closed, cold, and rigid. Repeatedly, she contrasts this surrogate family with her own, speculating on what her mother would think.

> Clara often found herself wondering what her mother would think. Such wonder never prevented her from any course of action—on the contrary, she sometimes feared it impelled her—but nevertheless, when drunk or naked, thoughts of her mother would fill her mind. And with the Denhams, these thoughts pressed upon her intolerably. (p. 145).

The qualities she admires in the Denhams are those which draw her farther from her mother and her lower middle class background; thus there is a sense in which the Denhams represent both a betrayal of her origins and an idealized "golden place."[9]

The maternal impulse lacking at home[10] is lavishly supplied at the Denhams. Clelia and her mother, whom she so much resembles, together compose an idealized mother figure; states Martin, the man whose baby the two women care for,

"The maternal impulse in your family tends to run riot" (p. 118). Mrs. Denham, who tells Clara, "'I would have called Clelia Clara if I'd thought of it'" (p. 112) seems the mother Clara should have had—Clelia the person she should have become.

Clara's love affair with Gabriel seems a way of securing her attachment to the good mother figure—Candida/Clelia—and separating from the bad one. In a family so close that its incestuous undertones are more than once remarked upon,[11] Gabriel is closely linked with both his mother and sister. Even before having met him, Clara is prepared to fall in love with this male version of Clelia/Candida. She is first attracted to Gabriel when she sees him in a family picture as a small boy by his mother's side (pp. 129-30), and she also remarks his similarity to Clelia (p. 128) just as he later notices hers. Furthermore Phillipa, Gabriel's cold, unhappy wife, can be seen as another incarnation of the bad mother, and Clara's liaison with Gabriel can be seen as a way of flaunting, once again, maternal prohibitions.

For Clara, the illicit nature of their relationship adds immensely to its appeal. She has always disliked relationships with the smell of permanence, and "had fancied the idea of a complicated, illicit and disastrous love" (p. 134). From the outset their relationship thrives on surreptitiousness and deception. In light of the closeness between Clara and Clelia, it seems surprising that she does not tell even Clelia about the affair—unless we consider the degree to which Clara views Clelia as a mother figure. She enjoys secretly violating taboo—so much so that she almost wonders at times "whether she did not find more pleasure in the situation than the man." (p. 188)

In the trip she takes to Paris with Gabriel, Clara is once again thrilled by her own daring, just as she had been years ago in her nighttime foray to Montmartre. When she excuses herself from school by making up a lie that her mother is ill, she feels a faintly guilty pleasure in her own wickedness, and throughout their trip the thought of her mother is never far from her mind. At the airport, she asks plaintively, "'Why hurry? Only people like my mother hurry to get to hotels, why bother about hotels?'" (p. 191). She enjoys feeling as unlike her mother as possible.

But whatever pleasure she takes in her own audacity is heavily counterbalanced by guilt. Earlier we learned that Clara often thinks of her mother when drunk or naked; in Paris, she is both. Try as she might, she cannot shut out the consciousness of a mother she has so much internalized. When she and Gabriel make love in the hotel, a thin-faced woman in an oil painting at the edge of the bed stares coldly down at them (p. 193). For a moment, fear of retribution catches hold of her; she tells Gabriel: "'I am chased, I am pursued, I run and run, but I will never get away, the apple does not fall far from the tree'" (p. 193). The suggestion here of original sin conveys her sense of indelible guilt.

An engrained puritanism makes Clara feel that her rebellious pleasures must be paid for. After leaving Gabriel behind after a Paris hotel party, Clara feels nausea and reflects that "the night would be in one sense at least paid for" (p. 218). Then she learns that her mother, whose illness Clara had fabricated, is dying.

> ...Her first thought was, I have killed my mother. By taking her name in vain, I have killed her. She thought, let them tell me no more that we are free, we cannot draw a breath without guilt, for my freedom she dies. And she felt closing in upon her, relentlessly, the hard and narrow clutch of retribution, those iron fingers which she had tried, so wilfully, so desperately to elude; a whole system was after her, and she the final victim, the last sacrifice, the shuddering product merely of her past. (p. 222)

Through the logic of the unconscious, Clara feels she has killed her mother through her defiant act of vacationing with a married man.

Where there is guilt there is also anger; the child in Clara undoubtedly feels unexpressed rage at the cold, withholding mother. But in the face of her mother's imminent death, Clara wishes to go beyond this anger, to discover the person in the mother. Finding herself alone in her mother's house, feeling her mother already dead, Clara can at last begin to view her with some objectivity. As she wanders around the house, looking at the "much hated objects of her infancy" (p. 226), she feels frightened "to think how much violence she had wasted upon such harmless things" (p. 226). In her mother's bedroom she searches, "looking anxiously for she knew not what, for some small white powdery bones, for some ghost of departed life." (p. 227)

In some old exercise books and photographs she finds what she is looking for. Two old pictures of her mother, one where she smiles with radiant intimacy at the unseen hands holding the camera, give Clara quite a different view of her mother. In her mother's old exercise books are stilted verses expressing hope for something beyond the narrow confines of her life—the very same hopes which had filled Clara herself. The discovery of this kinship with her mother makes her see how cruelly life can disappoint ardent young hopes like her own, but also makes her feel "glad to have found her place of birth...glad that she had however miserably preexisted...." Clara feels "for the first time, the satisfaction of her true descent." (p. 228)

This glimpse of her mother as a woman in her own right, a woman like herself, does not, however, prefigure a magical reconciliation. When she visits her mother in the hospital, she is reduced to lying when her mother demands why she did not come earlier. The mother's bitterness masks her sense of rejection, but what comes out, as usual, is venom.

> "If I were on my deathbed, it would be all the same to you lot. What do you care? I work my fingers to the bone, and what do you care? If I were on my deathbed, you wouldn't care. If I dropped dead, you'd walk over my dead body." (p. 231)

Despite the recent insight into their underlying bond, Clara cannot achieve a moment of honest closeness with her dying mother.

Though there is a difference, then, between having knowledge and acting on that knowledge, by the end of the novel Clara is moving away from her blinding subjectivity. The more clearly she can view her mother, the more she can accept herself, her past, Northam itself. She recognizes that her entire vision of Northam may have been distorted (p. 234); now that she knows she will never be trapped there, she can afford to see it—and thus her mother and herself—in a more charitable light.

Her new-found compassion for the pathos of her mother's life is brought out in a dream toward the end of the novel.

> She dreamed that it was she herself that was dying, that she had been given a week to live, and she was crying in her dreams in despair, but I can't die, there are so many things I wanted, there is so much I wanted to do, things that I can't do now, I can't do them this week, I wanted to do them later, you don't understand, my plans were long term plans. (p. 234)

The unconscious identification revealed in this dream suggests that Clara, in the experiences she accumulates so greedily, may be partly impelled by the desire to make up for her mother's lost opportunities.

With Gabriel, who awakes her from this dream with a phone call, she still yearns for some oceanic oneness, fantasizing of "a tender blurred

world where Clelia and Gabriel and she herself in shifting and ideal conjunction met and drifted and met once more" (p. 239). This fantasy of loving both the mother figure (Clelia) and the male whose image replaces and blurs with Clelia's provides a way for Clara to reconcile conflicting desires. In this interconnected Denham family, she could have both maternal and sexual love; she need not ever be alone again, but could drift about, easily and painlessly.

The conclusion of the novel is ambiguous. "Her mother was dying, but she herself would survive it, she would survive because she had willed herself to survive, because she did not have it in her to die" (p. 239). One critic says that here Clara "sacrifices the recognized truth to a truly fatal, willed rejection of her past."[12] Yet, while Clara has favored will at the expense of love, as she herself begins to see (p. 193), she has needed a strong will to counteract her pull toward an infantile passivity. What she needs now is a balance between love and will. At the end of the novel, her will to survive does not seem to me to be a rejection of her past, but rather an important realization of her separateness from it. She can accept the past, and her mother, as part of her only when she feels that they are not the whole of her. The idea that she can live despite her mother's death is set against her initial panic on learning of her mother's illness, her perception of herself as "the final victim, the last sacrifice" (p. 222). She needs her strong will to be more than a mere product of her past, but she cannot allow this will to block her capacity for love. Now that she has worked through various needs with her surrogate family, has obtained the nurture that she did not receive at home, she can be better prepared for a loving acceptance of herself and others.

II. *Lady Oracle*

Another novel which dramatizes the daughter's struggle to emancipate herself from her mother—and her past—is Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*. Like Clara Maugham, Joan Foster must learn to see her mother whole before she can accept herself. One critic notes the novel's "split between the world of fantasy and the unconscious, and the world of conscious reality," but attributes this split to "an acceptance of schizophrenia...as an aspect of modern life."[13] The worlds of fantasy and conscious reality which the heroine inhabits, however, involve a particular response to a significant central figure, not simply a fragmented modern society. Her schizophrenic response, if you will, results from conflicting desires to be at one with the mother and to separate from her. Consciously she defies the mother, longing to escape the pull that seems "a vortex, a dark vacuum,"[14] but when her conscious constraints are loosened, as in her dreams and automatic writing, we see the primal longing for the mother.

Joan's deep ambivalence toward her mother results from conflicting desires to be her mother's loved little daughter, and to be free, separate, unencumbered. In her escape to Europe where she attempts to cancel her past completely, Joan tries to free herself from the mother's image of her, from the pain of mutual guilt and betrayal. Yet no matter where she turns, even after her marriage, she carries her mother "like a rotting albatross." (p. 215)

The daughter's extreme dependence on the mother is brought out in an early dream.

> One of the bad dreams I used to have about my mother was this. I would be walking across the bridge and she would be standing in the sunlight on the other side of it, talking to someone else, a man whose face I couldn't see. When I was halfway across, the bridge would start to collapse, as I'd always feared it would. Its rotten planks buckled and split, it tilted over sideways and began to topple slowly into the ravine. I would try to run but it would be too late, I would throw myself down and grab onto

> the far edge as it rose up, trying to slide me off. I called out to my mother, who could still have saved me, she could have run across quickly and reached out her hand, she could have pulled me back with her to firm ground—But she didn't do this, she went on with her conversation, she didn't notice that anything unusual was happening. She didn't even hear me. (p. 62)

As the mother talks to this nameless man (the father?), the daughter perceives her abstraction as withholding of support. Since the mother has power to save her daughter, her inattention seems like indifference. Joan longs for a bridge that will restore her old sense of security, but the bridge she envisions is rotten and unreliable. Without the mother's support, she seems to be falling into an abyss. Her dependence means that she experiences maternal unconcern as denial of her very existence.

Joan's excessive eating as a girl is partly a way to assure herself that she exists. It is a way of claiming attention and punishing the mother; it contributes to her self-hatred and consoles her for it; it is both an aggressive means of overtly defying the mother and a regressive way of getting back to her. At the same time, it substitutes for the maternal nurturance she misses; it helps her to rebel. "I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get; the disputed territory was my body" (p. 67). When the mother focuses her energy on forcing Joan to reduce, Joan responds by eating more and even choosing clothes that accentuate her unfortunate shape. (p.85)

Ironically, however, even in her ostensible rebellion, Joan unconsciously obeys unspoken messages. The mother senses that Joan's eating is somehow connected to her. "'What have I done to make you behave like this?'...She was taking all the credit for herself; surely I was behaving like this not because of anything she had done but because I wanted to." (p. 86) A grossly overweight daughter is not sexually threatening. Though Joan's mother has long nagged Joan about her weight, she seems secretly pleased when she catches Joan in the ritual of gorging herself. When Joan finally sets about reducing, Mrs. Foster becomes more and more distraught, even leaving tempting pies and cakes around the house. She begins drinking heavily and, when Joan reveals that she has just eighteen more pounds to lose before she moves out, Mrs. Foster threatens her hysterically with a paring knife. Both mother and daughter experience each other as a source of security and claustrophobia.

This conflict drives the daughter constantly to seek security and long for freedom. With her husband and lovers Joan feels the same impulse to escape that she once did with her mother. When she escapes to Italy; she arranges her own death in the hope that "no shreds of the past would cling to me, no clutching fingers" (p.334). Invariably, however, lonely freedom propels her to seek attachment that soon threatens, once again, entrapment. Having left one marriage behind, Joan fantasizes another, but also sees, farther down the road, the same pattern of escape.

> Why did everyone of my fantasies turn into a trap? In this one, I saw myself climbing out a window, in my bibbed apron and bun, oblivious to the cries of children and grandchildren behind me. I might as well face it, I thought, I was an artist, an escape artist. I'd sometimes talked about love and commitment, but the real romance of my life was that between Houdini and his ropes and locked trunk; entering the embrace of bondage, slithering out again. (p.335)

Joan's fear of attachment is directly proportional to her longing for a total, unconditional love. In the books she writes, as in her relationship with Arthur, she dreams of a blissful, healing love. She writes Gothic romances because she

"longed for happy endings...needed the feeling of release when everything turned out right and I could scatter joy like rice all over my characters and dismiss them into bliss" (p. 321). With the heroines of her own books, Joan can play fairy godmother, transforming them "from pumpkins to pure gold" (pp. 31-32). At times she envisions herself as heroine in one of her own romances, rescued, delivered from herself.

Like Clara Maugham, Joan creates a fantasy of warm, accepting maternal love around a non-biological mother. As a girl, Joan looks to her Aunt Lou as the good, non-demanding mother. Unlike Joan's mother, Aunt Lou is physically warm and affectionate (p. 87). She cries, like Joan; she is fat too; she has a messy apartment; she is everything that Joan's real mother is not. Rather than placing demands and restrictions, she gives Joan permission, largely through her example, to do what she wants to do.

With her real mother a barrier always exists. Even during her marriage she dreams of being a helpless child again, trapped, on the other side of a closed door (p. 215). In Italy she dreams that this locked door opens momentarily, but she is still separated from her mother, this time by a glass barrier.

> ...She was crying soundlessly, she pressed her face against the glass like a child, mascara ran from her eyes in black tears.
>
> "What do you want?" I said, but she didn't answer. She stretched out her arms to me, she wanted me to come with her; she wanted us to be together.
>
> I began to walk towards the door. She was smiling at me now, with her smudged face, could she see I loved her? I loved her but the glass was between us, I would have to go through it. I longed to console her. Together we would go down the corridor into the darkness. I would do what she wanted.
>
> The door was locked. I shook at it and shook until it came open. (p. 330)

The glass barrier suggests that mother and daughter, like husband and wife, can come only so close. The crying child whom Joan longs to console is actually herself; she would mother her own mother, vicariously experiencing herself as a loved child.

Her automatic writing, in which she gives up conscious control, reveals the strength of her continuing attachment to the mother. Holding a candle in front of a mirror, Joan ventures down an imaginary corridor toward a tantalizing presence.

> There was the sense of going along a narrow passage that led downward, the certainty that if I could only turn the next corner or the next—for these journeys became longer—I would find the thing, the truth or word or person that was mine, that was waiting for me. (p. 223)

The elusive presence which the heroine tracks into her subconscious comes slowly into focus until her identitiy is finally revealed as the mother's.[15]

When her conscious controls are loosened, as in her automatic writing or her fiction, Joan comes to see her connection with the mother. But for her heroines, as for herself, this recognition does not guarantee a setting-free. Although Joan sees she must separate from the woman who "had been my reflection too long" (p. 331), she still wonders about the possibility of some magical, external solvent that would free them both. "What was the charm, what would set her free?" (p. 331). But there are no easy solutions, as heroines in her novel *Stalked by Love* discover when her heroine Charlotte gets close to the secret center of the maze, hears the mocking laugh of Felicia, the bad mother figure who should be discarded, according to conventional

gothic formula, so that she can win the hero. The solution no longer feels right to Joan, however; in her fiction, Joan has begun to confront the fact that men do not rescue women from themselves. Just as she has failed to find salvation through the men in her life, neither her father, husband, nor lovers, she can no longer save her heroines by some Byronic deliverance.

Although Joan has begun to accept the fact of "no happy endings, no true love" (p. 234) in her fiction, it is not clear how much she can apply this recognition to her life. Toward the end of the novel, Joan emerges from her reverie about *Stalked by Love* when she hears real footsteps coming up her walk. She hits this intruder, whom she confuses with her hero-villain of her novel, with a Cinzano bottle. This decisive action may seem to suggest a real turning point for Joan[16]; Margaret Atwood herself says that Joan has made some small advance. "...The reason that she feels better with the fellow she's hit over the head with the bottle than with anyone else is that at least she knows, at least the new relationship will be on some kind of honest basis, if there is one."[17] I, however, agree with Sherill Grace that "there is no way for the reader to be certain that anything has changed by the end of Joan's narration. Quite possibly, she will begin to spin another plot, this time around the new man in her life."[18] Although at first glance Joan does seem prepared to return to Arthur, to reality, to the consequences of her actions, saying vaguely "'I keep thinking I should learn some lesson from all this'" (p. 345), she does not articulate what knowledge she has gained. She does not necessarily seem ready to relinquish her pattern of evasive behavior, to substitute honest confrontation for romantic mystification. For the present, she chooses the easy course of action—staying in Rome—and has begun to fantasize about a man she knows nothing about, attracted to him partly because "there is something interesting about a man in a bandage" (p. 345). If he is hidden by a bandage, she can attribute whatever qualities she likes to him.[19]

Before one can confront the present, it is necessary to work through the conflicts of the past, and that is what Joan has been doing in her writing. In Joan's outer life, she has not much changed, but in her inner world of dream and fantasy, she has confronted those conflicts which alarm her more rational self. In her fiction, she articulates repressed knowledge. Though we do not know whether she can apply the insights which her writing reflects, she has faced her inner conflicts squarely in the visionary world of her imagination. In the inner world of her unconscious, Joan at last meets the figure in the mirror, the daughter in the mother, the mother in herself.

III. *Earthly Possessions*

A less equivocal resolution of the daughter's conflicting impulses appears in Anne Tyler's *Earthly Posessions.* Again, the contrapuntal technique suggests the theme; the narrative of the heroine's present adventures is interwoven with the story of her past. Since childhood, Charlotte Emory has longed to escape her mother's house, to divest herself of "earthly possessions" which come to stand for excess emotional baggage. The usual routes to separation fail with her, however; her college experience ends after one day, and her marriage keeps her still in her mother's house. Her unresolved separation conflicts are later projected onto her husband and family. Ironically, when she goes to the bank to withdraw funds with which to leave her husband, she is taken hostage by bankrobber/demolition derby driver Jake Simms. During their trip South, Charlotte sees her own restlessness mirrored in Jake. Just as he gradually begins to accept his ties to his young, pregnant girlfriend they pick up along the way, by the end of the novel Charlotte too seems better prepared to accept her emotional connections rather than trying to shrug them off.

For most of her life Charlotte denies her bond with her mother, looking at the embarrassingly

fat Mrs. Emory as a stand-in for a more satisfactory mother who somewhere longs for her. Yet, while this fantasy provides the comforting possibility of escape someday, it also suggests a deep insecurity. Charlotte likes thinking of another identity which waits for her to claim it, yet this very possibility makes her anxious. "These were my two main worries when I was a child; one was that I was not their true daughter and would be sent away. The other was that I *was* their true daughter and would never, ever manage to escape to the outside world." (p. 15)[20]

Her fantasy of having another real mother somewhere is reinforced when she is kidnapped as a child by a dark, gypsy woman. This dark, intense woman tells the child a story of refugee days, an endless journey, talking to Charlotte as if she had been there too. Imagining that she has finally met up with her true mother, Charlotte internalizes this story, which takes such a hold on her imagination that she sees herself throughout her life as preparing for this journey—"casting off encumbrances, paring down to the bare essentials." (p. 37)

Charlotte is also attracted to the gypsy qualities in another woman she idealizes as role model. Even more than the ex-refugee woman, her neighbor Alberta seems to epitomize a richly romantic life quite the opposite of her mother's. Alberta, with her house full of sons, approaches life with a happy carelessness; Charlotte wishes that "she would adopt me. I longed for her teeming house and remarkable troubles." (p. 64)

When she, like Clara Maugham, falls in love with the son of her idealized role model, we can see this love as a way of getting close to the fantasy mother, of, in fact, becoming her. During her engagement to Saul, Charlotte seems to become a baby again, sheltered, soothed, led. "I sheltered under his arm and listened to him plot our lives....I imagined myself suddenly as colorful, rich, and warm as Alberta, my narrow, parched life opening like a flower. All I had to do was give myself up. Easy. I let him lead me. I agreed to everything" (p. 79). Once she marries, however, the same claustrophobia she experienced with her mother is projected onto her husband. She had hoped to be released by marriage into a whole new identity like that of Alberta's, but because she still defines herself externally, marriage cannot free her from herself. It can only hold the mirror up to her insecurities. Like Joan Foster, she cannot bear the merciless exposure of intimacy that seems to entrap her further within her self-dislike.

In the counterpointing story of the get-away, Charlotte sees her own separation/attachment conflicts mirrored in her fellow passengers. Jake too fears entrapment, but wants the security of love. After he picks up his young, pregnant girlfriend, he seems to be constantly fighting shy of the marital noose, of the doom represented by gold, avocado and patricia curtains. A detached onlooker, Charlotte is now audience to a replay of her own struggle between freedom and attachment.

With Jake and Mindy, Charlotte gradually assumes a maternal role. At first, Charlotte rather enjoys her passive dependence on Jake, but before long, their roles reverse. By the end of their adventures, he depends on her, particularly for help with Mindy. Charlotte also finds herself in a maternal role with Mindy; when they have to stop the car so that Mindy can walk off her foot cramps, Charlotte feels that she and Jake "were like two parents exercising a child in the park." (p. 121)

Though Charlotte cannot see herself becoming the mother, the reader does. Still envisioning herself as the daughter, Charlotte has difficulties accepting news of Alberta's death. "Underneath I had always wanted her back. I wanted her approval; she was so much braver, freer, stronger than I had turned out to be" (p. 140). Having unconsciously molded her life on Alberta's, Charlotte seems unaware that she herself has

become Alberta. Not only does she have a houseful of Alberta's sons, but she seems to have acquired Alberta's happy nonchalance, her ability to take things in stride. Without realizing, she has also become the dark refugee woman who kidnapped her long ago. This woman, who had been "pretty in a stark, high-cheekboned kind of way" (p. 30) now faces her in the mirror as "someone stark and high-cheekboned, familiar in an unexpected way." (p. 189)

In the process of becoming the mother figure she has previously idealized, Charlotte prepares to accept more completely her real mother. When her mother develops cancer, Charlotte waits on her, thinks about her, attempts to discover some elusive secret.

> Then I had my mother to myself. For I couldn't let loose of her yet. She was like some unsolvable math problem you keep straining at, worrying the edges of, chafing and cursing. She had used me up, worn me out, and now was dying without answering any really important questions or telling me a single truth that mattered. (pp. 179-180)

The secret she finally learns concerns her underlying connection to this mother she had long ago rejected.

When the bedridden Mrs. Emory asks Charlotte to burn a photo of a smiling blond girl she has never seen before, Charlotte imagines that at last she sees a picture of her mother's true daughter. She feels vaguely connected to this little girl, and speculates that this little girl is living the footloose life that should have been hers while she, Charlotte, is "married to her true husband, caring for her true children, burdened by her true mother" (p. 173). She begins to sleep with this little girl's photo, to dream of entering "her sleazy, joyful world" (p. 173). Somehow this fantasy allows her to look at her mother more objectively, to "step back to a reasonable distance and finally take an unhampered view of my mother" (pp. 173-4). Charlotte's eventual discovery that the little girl in the photo is actually her mother stuns her, but frees a buried love.[21] She realizes that she herself is her mother's true daughter.

The mother's death does not, however, magically solve her ambivalence. While the recognition of her kinship with her mother allows her to see more easily her connections with other people, she finally decides that she will clear people and furniture out of her life, people who seem to be "using up such chunks of my life with their questions, comments, gossip, inquiries after my health" (p. 186). Still, she hesitates until a tin message from a cereal box—"Keep on truckin"—provides the necessary push.

Being taken hostage allows her to satisfy two conflicting impulses: to leave and to stay. She has escaped, but not through her own will. She has made a gesture toward separation, but can still count on love and approval at home. For once, a daughter can leave home with impunity. When Joan Foster and Clara Maugham return to their mothers' homes, they are punished by guilt. They have left; the mother has died or been stricken ill; cause and effect seem clear.

But because Charlotte's departure is forced, she can feel free of guilt while she works through her separation/attachment conflicts at a sanitized distance. Having seen her own restlessness mirrored in Jake, she begins to learn the impossibility of ever escaping from one's self. Through the process of recounting the story of her past, she has gained a more objective view of her relations to her mother and family. When she returns home, she can better accept human limitation—her own and other people's. She finally recognizes that traveling is not just a physical thing, selfhood not a matter of geography. When her husband asks her if she would like to take a trip, she replies "I don't see the need....We have been traveling for years, traveled all our lives, we are traveling still. We couldn't stay in one place if we tried" (p. 200). Despite the

people and possessions still crowding the edges of her life, she can experience herself as a separate person. She has realized both her connectedness with others and her separateness. No longer is she the perpetually rebellious daughter, caught between desires to flee and to stay. Having mothered others, she can finally mother herself.

From the analysis of these three women's novels, we can see different ways that women can attempt to overcome a dependence deeply engrained. The more childlike and unsure of themselves they feel, the more they deny their maternal ties. Yet, in the journey away from the mother, the daughter finds that the search for identity cannot bypass the mother, for it leads directly back to her. She may understand this discovery only on an intellectual level, as Clara Maugham does to some extent; she may confront it only in her unconscious, as Joan Foster does; or she may begin to integrate it into her life, as Charlotte Emory does. Perhaps Charlotte is better able to accept her tie with the mother because she does not have the same burden of guilt as the other two heroines. Unlike them, Charlotte does not need to fear that her leaving has "killed" the mother. She has not left home physically, and because she is present when the mother dies, she can more easily come to terms with a death she does not feel responsible for. When she finally does journey away from home, she has already begun to work through her own deep ambivalence. In addition, the apparently forced nature of her journey conveniently assuages any potential guilt. She need not feel guilty for leaving home, though it seems clear to the reader that she accompanies Jake as a willing hostage. When she returns to her husband, she is in a very real sense returning to her mother's home; she has almost literally replaced her mother (and father too, since she is operating his photography studio). While *Jerusalem the Golden* and *Lady Oracle* end on rather irresolute notes, *Earthly Possessions* ends with the daughter's more complete integration of her conflicting desires to merge and to separate; she alone stops traveling while seeing that "We have been traveling for years...we are traveling still." Though none of these authors gives prescriptive answers for the twentieth century daughter's conflicts, they outline the problem very well. To escape, the daughter needs will (Clara Maugham), encouragement (Joan Foster), imagination (Charlotte Emory), but to return home "and know the place for the first time," she needs love.

Notes

1. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 369. *Huckleberry Finn* goes full circle, beginning and ending with Huck's desire to "light out."
2. Clara Thomas, "*Lady Oracle*: The Narrative of a Fool-Heroine," in *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Arnold & Cathy Davidson (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1981), p. 173.
3. Signe Hammer, *Daughters & Mothers, Mothers & Daughters* (New York: New American Library, 1975), p. 146.
4. Nancy Chodorow quotes Harry Guntrip (from *Personality Structure and Human Interaction*, New York, 1961, p. 291) in "Family Structure and Feminine Personality" from *Women, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Simbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 62. "'*Mature dependence* is characterized by full differentiation of ego and object (emergence from primary identification) and therewith a capacity for valuing the object for its own sake and for giving as well as receiving; a condition which should be described not as independence but as mature dependence.'"
5. Anne Tyler, *Earthly Possessions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 104. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and will be indicated by page number in the text.
6. Ellen Cronan Rose quotes Margaret Drabble (from *Arnold Bennett*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974, p. 2) in *The Novels of Margaret Drabble: Equivocal Figures* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1980), p. 33. (Brackets are Rose's).
7. Lee Edwards, "*Jerusalem the Golden*: A Fable for our Times," *Women's Studies*, 6, No. 3 (1979), 323.
8. Margaret Drabble, *Jerusalem the Golden* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1967), p. 33. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and will be indicated by page number in the text.
9. Lee Edwards, 325.
10. The critic Valerie Grosvenor Myer notes how when Clara returns to her dying mother's house, she wants to make Ovaltine, but there is no milk in the house. "Neither Clara's mother nor her home have given her any spiritual or intellectual nourishment and Mrs. Maugham has been deficient in the 'milk of human kindness.'" In *Margaret Drabble: Puritanism and Permissiveness* (London: Vision Press, 1974), p. 85.
11. Clara, for instance, tells Gabriel, "'All your family...always seem to me to be in love with all the rest of your family. If you see what I mean; it always seems to be life with incest, don't you think?'" (p. 198). Gabriel says that his wife agrees.
12. Marion Vlastos Libby, "Fate and Feminism in the Novels of Margaret Drabble," *Contemporary Literature*, 16 (Spring 1975), 179.

13. Francis Mansbridge, "Search for the Self in the Novels of Margaret Atwood," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 22 (1978), 113-114.
14. Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart-Bantams, Ltd., 1977), p. 331. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and will be indicated by page number.
15. The woman Joan discovers lives "under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building" (p. 224). Sherill Grace suggests that the woman who dwells in this cave is associated with the earth mother; W.F. Jackson Knight, whose work Atwood knows, says "The start in the sanctity of caves is the belief that men come from the earth, and return to the earth, as to a mother. Access to her is by caves," p. 252 in Knight's *Vergil: Epic and Anthropology* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1967). See Sherill Grace, *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood*, ed. Ken Norris (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1980), pp. 120-122 for a discussion of the connection between the cave, the maze, and the mother in *Lady Oracle*.
16. One article states that this aggressive action is significant because Joan here "discovers a new aspect of her personality, one neither she nor the men in her life had previously seen. She has accepted herself and with that her own potential to do harm, to affect her world." Arnold and Cathy Davidson, in "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*: The Artist as Escapist and Seer," *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Summer, 1978), 175.
17. "Interview with Margaret Atwood," Linda Sandler, *The Malahat Review*, 41 (January, 1977), 25.
18. Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality*, p. 127.
19. Arnold and Cathy Davidson suggest that Joan's decision to write science fiction instead of Costume Gothics is a step forward. "Science fiction, though still fantasy, looks forward and implies at least survival" (p. 176). It does not seem to me, however, that science fiction is inherently less escapist than the gothic mode.
20. Freud comments on how a child who feels slighted by her parents may fantasize that she has been adopted. "The child's imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom she now has such a low opinion and of replacing them with others....[She] will make use in this connection of any opportune coincidences from her actual experience." "Family Romances," *Collected Papers* V, ed. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1959), p. 76.
21. It is interesting that both Charlotte and Clara Maugham, despite their amazingly rich imaginations, require the realistic evidence of a photo before they can see their mothers as daughter figures like themselves. A further mother/daughter connection is suggested in that Mrs. Emory wants Charlotte to burn her youthful photo (evidence of her past) just as Charlotte wants to escape her past. Similarly, Joan Foster's mother tried to change her past by deleting the physical evidence. When Joan looks at her mother's photograph album, she sees that her mother has cut out the faces of the men in the photographs from her past. "I could almost see her doing it, her long fingers working with precise fury, excising the past, which had turned into the present and betrayed her, stranding her in this house, this plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit" (*Lady Oracle*, p. 180).