



# DEMETER'S DAUGHTERS,

## The Mother-Daughter Motif in Fiction by Canadian Women

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Our interest in exploring the mother-daughter relationship in Canadian Literature was first spurred by our curiosity about women characters who were not defined by their relations to the men in their lives, but whose destin-

ies were sharply influenced by women. The mother-daughter pair seemed a good choice, both as an obvious beginning point and because it was fresh territory. Some recent feminist criticism had observed that "the mother-

daughter combination is rare in legend and literature,"(1)but upon further investigation we found that the combination occurred frequently but that this relationship was not regarded as significant, particularly in contrast to the critically acclaimed importance of opposite-sexed familial pairs such as in Oedipus, Hamlet or Lear.(2)

Phyllis Chesler's work Women and Madness (1972) underscored the importance of this relationship most eloquently in her argument that madness in women can be related to a loss of "matrimony," that is "a legacy of power and humanity from adults of the same sex--their mothers."(3)Further, she supplied us with a suggestive framework for classifying the possible relationships between mothers and daughters in her paradigm of Demeter, goddess of grain, and her four daughters. Demeter's rescue of Persephone from Hades' abduction--what the sun terms "the natural fate of daughters, to leave their mother's home, to lose their virginity, to marry and to give birth to children," (p. xv)--assures that Persephone remains for most of the year in her mother's house; Psyche yearns for "woman's natural fate" and marries Eros; Athena rejects her mother entirely, choosing to be reborn of man; and Artemis, legendary founder of the Amazons, attempts to synthesize maternity and individuality, tenderness and power.

Through the work of Adrienne Rich, in Of Woman Born (1976), the shadowy relation between Demeter and Persephone emerges as the most significant of the mother-daughter relations, because it exemplifies what Rich calls "the great unwritten story,"(4)that is, the emotionally charged bond between mother and daughter and the havoc that is wrought by cleaving the bond between the two women, what Rich refers to as "the essential female tragedy." (p. 237) Rich is heavily indebted to anthropological interpretations of the Eleusinian mysteries which celebrated Demeter as a great goddess--not for her ability to make the earth fertile, but for the miracle she performed, catalyzed by her wrath, in calling back her daughter from the dead, in undoing the rape and abduction of Persephone. (p. 239)

Rich and Chesler concur that the reduced powers and status of mothers in modern society have devastated them and their daughters as well; because of patriarchal values, daughters have been denied the courageous, strong, miraculous mothering of Demeter who defies and triumphs over destructive male powers. Mothers have been denied power to change their daughters' fates or to challenge their prescribed natural destinies. This "Loss," in Rich's terms, has multiple results for daughters who bear a lifetime wound.

Rather than focus solely on the patriarchal shaping or "institutionalization" of Motherhood (what Rich describes as patriarchy's control over each woman's "potential relationship to her powers of reproduction and to her children," (p.13) we also wish to explore the "loss" of the mother to the daughter, the loss of sustaining warmth and protection, the loss of an inheritance of strength because "mothering" has been equivalent to crippling the daughter. We believe our analysis not only supports Rich's theory that the mother-daughter relationship contains "materials for the deepest mutuality as well as the most painful estrangement," (p. 225) but that Canadian women writers have already used these materials, consciously and unconsciously, in shaping their fictional accounts of women's lives.

Ethel Wilson's war-time novel, Hetty Dorval (1947), affords an early glimpse of the potential of the mother-daughter relationship to range from the "deepest mutuality" to the "most painful estrangement," and dramatizes the effect of either extreme by contrasting two daughter figures who are the novel's central characters. The personality and destiny of the lascivious, selfish, destructive Hetty Dorval--illegitimate daughter of the deceitful and fearful Mrs. Broom, are antithetical to the wholesome, affectionate temperament and the successfully resolved destiny of Frankie Burnaby, daughter of the kindly, nur-

tant and courageous married woman, Mrs. Burnaby. Although Wilson's characterization depends partially on the stereotype of the beautiful and amoral Hetty as the "predatory" fallen woman, a fuller understanding of Hetty's ruthlessness and selfishness comes about because Wilson probes the mysterious loss to Hetty of her mother, and suggests that this loss has prevented Hetty from developing into a properly compassionate and responsible woman.

Mrs. Broom, shamed by the social taboos against illegitimacy, has posed all of Hetty's life as her dutiful housekeeper, but is provoked into revealing her biological bond with Hetty when the latter superciliously announces to Frankie: "I never had a mother. . . and I've got on very nicely without one." (5) For Frankie, nurtured by a warm and supportive mother, whom she unreservedly admires for her "constancy, courage, and sparkling sincerity," (p. 69) the loss of a mother's love and guidance is devastating. She accosts Mrs. Broom: "Why did you let Hetty grow up like this? If you'd brought her up like mother and daughter, maybe she'd. . . ." (p. 83) Frankie hopes, now that the truth is out, that a "new relation would exist between mother and daughter," (p. 86) although she cannot imagine what shape that new relationship might take.

Hetty's loss, however, is irreparable

and has caused problems incapable of being successfully resolved. In stark contrast to Frankie's eventual return to her mother's house in British Columbia, Hetty and her "mother" permanently break their ties.

Yet Hetty's characteristic tendency to "island" herself from others, to wall herself off in silence and absence of emotion, seems a legacy of her mother's silence and repeats her characterization as a "woman of wood." (p. 81) Suggestively nicknamed "mouse," Mrs. Broom had withdrawn into a conspiracy of silence about her daughter--because she feared social ostracism for bearing a child out of wedlock. Thus she exemplifies, in the extreme, how patriarchal society can prevent the mother from legitimizing the existence of her child and can pervert the bond that exists between mother and daughter.

The fact that Mrs. Broom has stayed at Hetty's side as her domestic servant, providing her with only the basic physical care, shows the inadequacy of the institutionalized ideal of motherhood as domestic service to one's children, without the emotions of the mother-daughter bond. The fact that Hetty's silence and selfishness are metaphorically linked to the beginnings of World War II by the novel's end, suggests how important, and how tragic, has been the loss to her of this primary female relationship.

Another tragic dissolution of the

mother-daughter bond is portrayed with savage irony in Mavis Gallant's Green Water, Green Sky (1959), which traces a ten year period in the lives of Bonnie McCarthy, a flirtatious, glamorous, expatriate American divorcee, wandering around Europe, and her exotic, red-haired adolescent daughter, Flor. Bonnie insists, from beginning to end, that she will not be separated from, nor "lose" her daughter: indeed, she stays close to Flor at all times--and this includes living with Flor and the man she eventually marries.

Since Bonnie so frequently extolls the closeness of mother and daughter, she suggests a modern version of the love between Demeter and Persephone. But Gallant's earliest image of the pair is ambivalent and ironic. She pictures them "sitting close so their cheeks were pressed and both of them talked at once and began laughing and crying with an easiness of emotion, as if they did this a lot." (6) Juxtaposed with these images of hysterical unity are images of fracture, disharmony. Influenced by a Freudian perspective, Gallant seems to portray Bonnie as the model of the possessive, neurotic mother overpowering her daughter; Flor fails to rebel successfully against her mother, and, in Freudian terms, fails to achieve a healthy, adult independence from her. This would account for Flor's eventual descent into madness. It is clear, however, that Flor is not really "over-mothered," but suffering severe-

ly from the "loss" of her mother: her mother's inability to pass on to Flor a legacy of strength.

What Flor does inherit from her mother is rootlessness, economic dependence and humiliation. Caught by her husband in an adulterous affair, Bonnie, and Flor along with her, have been ejected from the "husband's" home and denied his financial support. Flor also inherits her mother's destructive belief that her value as a person lies in her sexual attractiveness to men.

Flor passively, and indirectly, resists her mother's "legacy" and her "nurturance" during her adolescent years, even to her symbolic inability to menstruate. After her marriage, Flor's rejection of her mother is more direct and systematic. She takes an active role in disfiguring herself, as Gallant notes; "as if to force [her husband] to value her on other terms." (pp. 37-38) She ceases having sexual relations with her husband; she retreats further into madness.

Flor, indeed exhibits "matrophobia" (7) --the fear of becoming one's mother. Flor's rejection of her feminine beauty, her coldness, may be a fear of repeating her mother's artificially glamorous life, her demeaning seductiveness. Her mother's version of femininity has openly displayed the drawbacks, the powerlessness of women. So deeply crippling is this legacy that even Flor's attempts to find a

surrogate, non-biological mother in her female analyst are doomed to failure because Flor no longer believes that anything female can sustain or nurture. As Gallant tells us: "There were moments when [Flor] forgot that Dr. Linetti was a woman and was ready to pardon her; but then she remembered that his cheat was from a known tribe, subjected to the same indignities, the same aches and pains, practising the same essential deceptions. And here was this impostor, presuming to help!" (p. 32)

Although in some ways a characteristically "anti-Mom" novel, Green Water, Green Sky reveals beneath the merciless satire of Bonnie, Gallant's recognition that the loss for both mother and daughter is not a subject of ridicule but an experience of pain and destruction. While Flor's madness might be viewed as an ironic triumph over her possessive mother, the origins of her madness lie in the failure of a daughter to receive "a legacy of power and humanity" from her mother.

Margaret Laurence's Jest of God (1966), also deals with a daughter's inheritance of weakness from her mother, and recreates the consistently painful estrangement between Rachel Cameron and her widowed, aging, weak-hearted mother. As a 34-year old spinster school-teacher, Rachel has inherited from her prissy and prudish mother a legacy of female powerlessness, self-loathing and disgust at human sexu-

ality. Mrs. Cameron has instilled in her daughter a crippling host of restrictions, physical and emotional, which may be summed up in her insistence, in line with her anxiety that her daughter conform to patriarchal values, that virginity is "a woman's most precious possession." (8) With the memory of the silence and distance between her parents still fresh in her mind, Rachel sees in her mother a most frightening model of female entrapment, passivity and repressions.

Denied the mothering she needs, Rachel reacts in a variety of characteristic ways, each one of which fails to satisfy or resolve the deficiency in her emotional make-up. She attempts to "mother" her school-children but remains unfulfilled because of their transience and because she sees herself re-enacting the process of smothering joy, instinct and independence in her children, especially in the little girls, that is characteristic of her own mother's "mothering." Rachel's fear of repeating her mother's victimization is strikingly etched in the image of her recurrent nightmare: being fastened to a ceaselessly turning wheel over which she has no control. (In her fantasy resolution, Rachel is saved from her mother's fate by a dashing male rescuer.)

As a dutiful daughter, resentful of her mother's dependence, yet guilt-

ridden by her dislike of her mother's actions and manners, terrified that she has already become her mother, Rachel's life seems destined for the destructiveness directed against others or herself, of a Hetty Dorval or a Flor Harris. However, in Calla, Rachel's school-teacher friend, who calls her "child," Laurence creates a non-biological mother from whom Rachel derives not only strength and caring, but also new horizons, rather than hopelessness, alcoholism and possibly suicide. Some of these horizons--like Calla's lesbianism--Rachel rejects. Others have a permanent and beneficial influence, such as the evangelically inspired release of Rachel's sensual life in Calla's Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn.

Calla's healthiest legacy to her "child," Rachel, is the courage to be her own person--individual, unusual, even peculiar--and to shed her mother's dessicating self-consciousness. What is most interesting about the strengthening of Rachel is that it permits her to re-establish a relationship with her mother.

Early in her struggle to be free of her oppressive inheritance, Rachel supposed that her greatest "failure" was in returning to her mother's side when her father died. She imagines that what she lacks in life is ruthlessness, the ability to cut her

mother out of her life. Instead, she becomes able to shed her guilt and forgive the old woman for passing on a stunted legacy. She finally taps the "real" mother potential in herself--the courageous and sustaining mother rather than the false institutionalized ideal of motherhood--and assimilates that with her new-found freedom from anxieties to conform. Rachel leaves Manawaka for a freer life in the west, but takes along Mrs. Cameron as her "elderly" child, and envisions, in the joy-filled monologue which ends the novel, a host of possibilities for her life, for both the daughter and the mother within her.

Minn Burge, central figure and narrator of Marian Engel's The Honeyman Festival (1970), also undergoes an evolutionary process--but having more revolutionary overtones than Rachel's --of re-orienting herself towards her mother and her mother's legacy. She awakens to the recognition, ultimately, that this legacy, which she all her life has fought against, is of central importance to her.

Unlike most daughters, including Flor and Rachel, whose matrophobia originates in their mother's dependent status, humiliation or victimization, Minn fears imitating the strong, aggressive, commanding and dictatorial image of her mother, or of assuming her armour-plated invincibility to emotion. When Minn thinks of her

hometown, she thinks of it as the place where "they were all scared of your Mum." (9) Steel-willed Gertrude has not given her daughter any warmth or mutuality. What Minn remembers of her daughterhood are scenes of humiliation and condemnation by Gertrude. The battle between them raged so consistently that Minn pictures herself as "a large lolloping rib of Gertrude, never mind Willie [her father], he's away as usual, sprung from the forehead of Gertrude to sour her life."

(p. 49) Not surprisingly, Minn leaves her mother's home as soon as she can, and assumes she has put her out of her life forever.

Another aspect of Gertrude's legacy consists of the imperatives to take direct action in the world. "Build! Organise! Preserve!" (p. 52) In order to avoid any semblance of similarity to her mother, Minn now pursues chaos and disorder in a crumbling fourteen-room house in downtown Toronto, and before that, lived a bohemian existence in Europe as one of the mistresses of the celebrated film-maker, Honeyman. Initially, Minn sees her backlash against her mother's strength somewhat self-righteously, wallowing in and maximizing her inability to order and control her own life. She justifies her confusion, her lack of direction, her failure to define her own realities, on the grounds that, not only is she the mother of three toddlers, whose father, like her own, is regularly absent, but she is in the



eighth month of her fourth pregnancy. Her body, her reproductive capacity, has wholly absorbed her energies for giving shape to her life.

Gradually Minn's discontents as a daughter, although not eroded, undergo a significant diminution when she realizes the full extent of the bond linking mother and daughter and sees that, in fact, she has not severed Gertrude from her life. As she looks around her home she realizes: "It was not her house, it was her mother's house: Turkey carpet, plants in the window, dark curtains. Only the piano missing. She sank into herself, startled. Did she so much love Gertrude that she made her house again?" (p. 97) Minn is left to wonder, fearfully, whether she has similarly and unknowingly imitated Gertrude's domineering manner and coldness, despite her obvious attempts to reject them; or, conversely, whether she has hurt, not only herself, but her children as well, by refusing to impose any of Gertrude's healthy traits of discipline and control.

In her struggle to define reality for herself Minn does not fully articulate the answer to the question of what she has assimilated or rejected of her mother; but the revelation that her mother's legacy--as well as love for her mother--exists, makes a deep impression on her. After this revelation, Minn stops rejecting responsibility for what happens in the "lar-

ger world" as well as for "her own character which seemed to be getting out of hand." (p. 40) Minn successfully resists the entry of the police into her house in the early morning hours after the annual Honeyman party, and fiercely, physically attacks the policeman who tries to enter without a warrant. Though this leaves Minn feeling both "shamed" and "victorious," it has roused her from her torpor, and permitted her to retrieve the positive aspects of Gertrude's strong model of womanhood.

Sylvia Fraser's Pandora (1972) deals with the mother-daughter relationship within a working-class environment in "Mill City," a thin disguise for Hamilton, Ontario. It traces the first seven and three-quarter years in the life of her central figure, Pandora Gothic, who comes of age during the violence of the Second World War. The general powerlessness of mothers within patriarchal society is exacerbated by problems of finances and by the overt insistence within this working-class household that the father is not only its head but its lord and master as well. Characterized neither by the fussy "over-mothering" of Mrs. Cameron, nor the muscular domination of Gertrude Williams, Adelaide Gothic is so devoted to her domestic chores and so imprisoned in the imperatives of her husband, that Pandora regularly fails to get her mother's support in any

battles waged against the tyrannical, steel-hooked butcher, Lyle Gothic.

In many ways the novel allegorizes the temptations set before girl children to follow their mothers in love, despite the pains and humiliation of such a route, or to reject their mothers in hatred, leaving space for "secret yearnings," for horizons beyond the roofs of "Mill City," but simultaneously to feel bereft of the mother's love. Pandora's twin sisters, Adel and Ada, who, we are told, "live inside my mother's name" (10) present the institutionalization of daughterhood: sensible, gracious, obedient, humble, they fight over who gets the smallest piece of cake. Pandora, given over to Wonder Woman comics, preferring comedies and adventures to romance at the movies, is "aggressive, dynamic, fearless--all the things little boys are taught to be." (p. 167) Her seemingly endless energy to defy the rules of her father's household brings her into constant clash not only with him, but with her mother, whose function is to "police" the household as Lyle demands. During these times, when Adelaide must support the father's authority, defend his rights as superior to the child's right, or even superior to what she herself believes is morally "right," the division between Pandora and her mother deepens to an almost irreparable rift, as Pandora recognizes that her mother is betraying her.

Not only is she endlessly energetic but she is boundlessly curious and imaginative, yearning to be free enough of the restrictions of her world so that one day she might be able to "nibble at the moon!" (p. 26) The classical Pandora, a misogynistically interpreted figure, is the curious woman who unleashes misery on the world, as well as hope. Fraser's Pandora, by her curious insistence on piercing the miserable truths of the adult world, recognizes, among other problems, her mother's victimization and passivity, and shortly before her eighth birthday, despairs, without knowing why.

The "hope" that comes out of this misery is one of the few miracles performed by a modern fictional mother that comes close to reproducing the change in a daughter's destiny supplied by Demeter's strength; and the fact that this miracle is performed by Adelaide Gothic, seemingly the chief representative of the Kinder, Küche, Kirche school of institutionalized motherhood, is sufficient to bring a ray of hope to us all. Adelaide recognizes that Pandora does not "seem very happy with the sort of life we can provide," (p. 252) and has hit upon the scheme of using the three hundred dollars Lyle has inherited from his mother, to begin a fund for Pandora--to assure her of what the author calls "Another Sort of Life"--the details of which remain vague, but are instinctively known by

Pandora as the "freedom" for which she has been yearning. Her response, however, suggests the ambiguity, the costs surrounding the mother-daughter split:

Pandora is suddenly overwhelmed with love for her mother. She wants to take her mother's hand. She wants to tell her mother that she understands, and appreciates, her particular quality of magic: . . . about the hole-y socks which, when pricked thirty-three times one way, and thirty-three times the other, magically become whole; about hoarded pennies which alchemize to nickel and then to silver and then into running shoes. Pandora wants to take her mother's hand, to cling to it possibly, and therein lies her dilemma: she is afraid she will stick to it, glued at the end, like Adel-Ada. She is afraid she will never get to know Another Sort. . . Another Sort . . . . Or maybe her mother will take her hand away? (p. 253)

Despite the acknowledgement of the emotional cost involved in the daughter rejecting her mother's route, the novel ends with a positive sense of the mother-daughter relationship. Fraser pictures Pandora "running down the street, tossing and catching her own possibilities like a bright golden ball up, up into the sunlight." (p. 254) As Rich notes in her definition of courageous mothering, "The most important thing one woman can do for

another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities." (p. 246)

The central quest motif in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing (1972), a novel hailed by Adrienne Rich as "a strange and complex modern version of the Demeter-Kore myth" (p. 240), also culminates in the recognition by the unnamed central female character of the significance of her mother's, not just her father's, legacy. "More than ever I needed to find it, the thing she had hidden; the power from my father's intercession wasn't enough to protect me, it gave only knowledge and there were more gods than his." (11)

Disappointed by a lack of closeness with her prudish, invalid mother since childhood, the narrator early rejected the example of her mother's monotonous, subservient existence--a life which is an empty record, like her final diary, of "the weather and the work done on that day: no reflections, no emotions." (p. 22) Wondering how her mother managed to fill up the vacant hours between the routines of preparing lunch and supper, she cannot imagine living her mother's life: "impossible to be like my mother, it would need a time warp; she was ten thousand years behind the rest," or, she adds suggestively, "fifty years ahead of them." (p. 52)

Growing up female, the narrator has been subjected to the tortures of the miniature chauvinists of the schoolyard, assaulted by the media's images of woman as dependent and inferior being ranging from household drudge to mindless doll, and pressured by her peers into make-up, crinolines and all the rituals of the religion of glamour. She has been conditioned to believe that "men ought to be superior" (p. 111) and that women, in their inferiority, ought to defer to the male's greater strength, wisdom, rationality and his more direct links with the patriarchal divinity. Estranged from her own body, seeing herself as theatrically victimized as a carnival woman sawn apart in a wooden crate and feeling as if she has been turned into an incubator to satisfy the dynastic drives of her aging lover, the narrator gradually retreats into madness and a total identification with the raped and ravaged Canadian wilderness.

This madness ultimately is healing, putting her back in touch with the earth, the animals and her own fertility; she rises from under the lake's surface like Kore returning from the dead. Two revelations are correlated with the salutary madness and they result in a renewal of the narrator's vitality, an ability to experience emotions--even love--and in her deeper understanding of her mother's legacy. The first is an old picture, the last

cryptic pictograph the narrator must decode, a prenatal portrait done in crayon, of "a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out." (p. 158) Identification of this "miraculous double woman" (p. 177) as her own mother, and the baby as herself before birth, recalls Rich's description of the potential for the mother-daughter bond to be one of the "deepest mutuality," the intertwining of "two biologically alike bodies, one . . . lying in amniotic bliss inside the other;" (p. 225) further, it suggests the potential in each woman to be both daughter and mother.

The second epiphanic revelation is the narrator's final reunion with her mother in a vision of her at one with the wilderness, into which she so often had disappeared, feeding the jays; this final visitation presents her as some sort of Earth Mother or "Mistress of the Animals." As Rich suggestively indicates, it is as if the narrator "has worked her way back, through fasting and sacrifice--beyond patriarchy." (p. 242) In fact, the narrator's final obsession with ritualistic preparations and female power suggests a re-enactment of the Eleusinian mysteries and a "time-warp," a return to a time when female potency, fertility and love between mother and daughter was celebrated. The narrator cannot rest at this primitive stage, however, as her mother tried to

do--but she has learned from her mother's legacy "how to act." (p. 153) The conclusion which she draws is: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim." (p. 191)

The recurrence of the mother-daughter motif in contemporary Canadian fiction suggests an awareness, conscious or not, on the part of Canadian women authors, that a woman's relation to the first woman in her life is of primary importance. It is tempting to see an historical progress in mother-daughter relations through

the four decades of the fiction we have studied, and, indeed, the two most recent novels, Pandora and Surfacing, recognize more intensely and more directly that mothers and daughters need not be life-long opponents any more than they must be indistinguishable as individuals. The next task is to try to interpret the pattern evolving in the mother-daughter motif; but for now more serious critical attention ought to be paid to the depiction of the joys as well as the tragedies of the mother-daughter relationships in Canadian literature.

#### NOTES

1. Elizabeth Fisher, "Mothers and Daughters," Aphra: The Feminist Literary Magazine, 2 (Autumn 1971), 3.
2. Edith G. Neisser, Mothers and Daughters (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 330-331.
3. Phyllis Chesler, Women and Madness (New York: Avon Books, 1972), p. 18. All references to this edition will be cited in the text.
4. Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 225. All references to this edition will be cited in the text.
5. Ethel Wilson, Hetty Dorval (Toronto: Macmillan, 1947), p. 82. All references to this edition will be cited in the text.
6. Mavis Gallant, Green Water, Green Sky (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1959), pp. 11-12.
7. Rich, p. 235.
8. Margaret Laurence, A Jest of God (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), pp. 89-90. All references to this edition will be cited in the text.
9. Marian Engel, The Honeyman Festival (Toronto; Anansi, 1970), p. 57. All references to this edition will be cited in the text.
10. Sylvia Fraser, Pandora (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 14. All references to this edition will be cited in the text.
11. Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (Toronto: Paperjacks, 1973), p. 153. All references to this edition will be cited in the text.