

Motherhood Under Hardship: Insights from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

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Abstract

*Motherhood, as a universally relatable experience, is a central theme in literature, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. This article explores its literary significance, impact on character development, and implications for identity, sacrifice, and love. Ancient and classical literature depicted motherhood as fertility and nurture, while the medieval period emphasized maternal sacrifice and the Renaissance introduced complex roles. The 19th century's realism focused on everyday maternal experiences, and the 20th century brought diverse feminist perspectives. Literature explores and subverts maternal archetypes, with characters like Mrs. Weasley and Edna Pontellier illustrating maternal love's spectrum. Overall, motherhood in literature offers profound insights into the human condition. This study delves into how in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Katie Nolan embodies the resilience, sacrifice, and hope that highlight the deeply entwined theme of selflessness and the complexities of maternal love in motherhood.*

Keywords: Motherhood, Maternal archetypes, Historical perspectives, Feminist literary analysis, Maternal love, and Cultural contexts.

Motherhood, as a universally relatable and fundamental experience, has been a central theme in literature, transcending cultural, temporal, and geographical boundaries. This article explores the literary significance of motherhood, examining its portrayal and impact on character development and broader implications for understanding identity, sacrifice, and love. Historical perspectives reveal how ancient and classical literature depicted motherhood as fertility and nurture, with figures like Demeter and Venus symbolizing maternal aspects. The medieval period emphasized the Virgin Mary's model of maternal sacrifice, while the Renaissance introduced more complex maternal roles. The 19th century's realism brought everyday maternal experiences to the forefront, as seen in works by Austen and Tolstoy. The 20th century introduced diverse and feminist perspectives, with authors like Woolf and Morrison highlights the emotional labour and cultural complexities of motherhood.

Literature often employs and subverts archetypal maternal roles to explore identity, showing

both the nurturing and overbearing aspects of maternal influence. Motherhood in literature also serves as a vehicle for exploring identity, with characters like Mrs. Weasley and Edna Pontellier illustrates the spectrum of maternal love. The theme of sacrifice is deeply entwined with motherhood, depicting selflessness and the complexities of maternal love. In “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn”, Katie Nolan embodies resilience, sacrifice, and hope, highlighting the multifaceted nature of motherhood. Overall, the literary exploration of motherhood offers profound insights into the human condition, reflecting the complexities and contradictions of this universal experience.

Historical Perspectives

Ancient and Classical Literature

In ancient literature, motherhood often epitomized fertility, nurture, and the continuity of life. Greek mythology, for instance, offers a plethora of maternal figures like Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, whose maternal grief over the abduction of her daughter Persephone by Hades brings about the changing seasons. Similarly, in Roman mythology, the figure of Venus as a mother to Aeneas underscores the protective and guiding aspects of motherhood, as she aids him in his quest to establish what will become Rome.

Medieval and Renaissance Literature

The medieval period, with its strong Christian influences, placed the Virgin Mary as the epitome of motherhood. Her depiction as the compassionate, ever-forgiving mother of Christ provided a model for maternal sacrifice and unconditional love. The Renaissance, while retaining some of these religious connotations, also began to explore motherhood in more secular contexts. Shakespeare’s plays, for example, often depicted mothers in complex ways, balancing their roles between familial duty and personal desires, as seen in characters like Gertrude in “Hamlet” and Volumnia in “Coriolanus”.

Motherhood in Modern Literature

The 19th Century: Realism and the Domestic Sphere

The 19th century witnessed a significant shift with the advent of realism, which brought the intricacies of everyday life into the literary forefront. Authors like Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy and the Brontë sisters delved deeply into the domestic sphere, portraying motherhood as a complex, multifaceted experience. In “Pride and Prejudice” by Jane Austen, Mrs. Bennet’s preoccupation with marrying off her daughters underscores the social pressures and limitations faced by women, while also providing a satirical lens on maternal anxieties. Conversely, in

“Anna Karenina” by Leo Tolstoy, the maternal struggles of Anna, torn between her duties to her son and her passionate love for Vronsky highlights the often-painful sacrifices associated with motherhood.

The 20th Century: Diverse Voices and Feminist Perspectives

The 20th century brought diverse perspectives on motherhood, influenced by feminist movements and a broader range of voices in literature.

Feminist Reinterpretations

Virginia Woolf’s works, particularly “To the Lighthouse” offer profound insights into the inner lives of mothers. Mrs. Ramsay, the central maternal figure, embodies the emotional labor and societal expectations placed on women, serving as a poignant critique of traditional gender roles. Similarly, Sylvia Plath’s “The Bell Jar” explores the pressures of motherhood and societal expectations through the character of Esther Greenwood, reflecting the author’s own struggles with mental illness and the demands of being a mother.

Multicultural Perspectives

The latter half of the 20th century saw an explosion of multicultural literature that enriched the portrayal of motherhood. Authors like Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, and Isabel Allende provided nuanced depictions of motherhood within different cultural contexts. In “Beloved” Morrison presents Sethe, an escaped slave who is haunted by the ghost of her dead daughter. Sethe’s act of infanticide, intended to protect her child from the horrors of slavery, raises profound questions about the extremities of maternal love and the traumatic legacy of enslavement. Amy Tan’s “The Joy Luck Club” explores the generational and cultural conflicts between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters, highlighting the complexities of motherhood in a diasporic context. Isabel Allende’s “The House of the Spirits” intricately weaves maternal narratives across generations, illustrating the enduring strength and resilience of women in the face of political and personal turmoil.

Motherhood and Character Development

Archetypal Roles and Subversion

Literature often employs archetypal roles to portray mothers, but it also subverts these roles to reveal deeper truths about the human condition.

The Nurturer

The nurturing mother is a ubiquitous archetype, epitomized in characters like Marmee in Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women." Marmee's unwavering support and moral guidance help shape her daughters into independent, resilient women, highlighting the profound influence of maternal love and wisdom.

The Overbearing Mother

Conversely, the overbearing mother, as seen in D.H. Lawrence's "Sons and Lovers" where Mrs. Morel's excessive attachment to her son Paul stifles his emotional growth and illustrates the darker aspects of maternal influence. This portrayal underscores the delicate balance between maternal care and the need for children to develop their own identities.

Subversion of Maternal Archetypes

Modern literature often subverts these archetypes to challenge traditional notions of motherhood. In "We Need to Talk About Kevin" by Lionel Shriver, Eva, the protagonist, grapples with ambivalence and guilt about her role as a mother to a son who commits a school massacre. This unsettling narrative forces readers to confront uncomfortable questions about maternal responsibility, nature versus nurture, and the societal expectations placed on mothers.

Motherhood as a Vehicle for Exploring Identity

Motherhood serves as a powerful vehicle for exploring identity, both for the mother and her children.

Maternal Identity

For many female characters, motherhood becomes a defining aspect of their identity. In "A Room of One's Own", Virginia Woolf discusses the constraints placed on women's creativity and independence, emphasizing how motherhood often subsumes women's identities. Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" takes this a step further, depicting a dystopian society where women are valued solely for their reproductive capabilities, raising chilling questions about autonomy and selfhood.

Children's Identity

The impact of motherhood on children's identity is another rich literary theme. In "The Glass Castle" by Jeannette Walls, the author's complex relationship with her mother shapes her understanding of resilience, creativity, and self-worth. Similarly, in "The Joy Luck Club", the mothers' experiences and cultural heritage profoundly influence their daughters' identities, underscoring the intergenerational transmission of values, traumas, and aspirations.

Broader Implications of Motherhood in Literature

Sacrifice and Selflessness

The theme of sacrifice is deeply entwined with motherhood in literature. Maternal characters often embody selflessness, enduring personal hardships for the sake of their children.

Classic Examples

In “Les Misérable” by Victor Hugo, Fantine sacrifices everything to provide for her daughter Cosette embodies the ultimate maternal selflessness. Her tragic fate highlights the societal injustices that compound the challenges of motherhood.

Contemporary Examples

In contemporary literature, the theme of sacrifice is explored with greater nuance. In “Room” by Emma Donoghue, the protagonist, Ma, endures years of captivity to protect her son, Jack, her strength and ingenuity underscoring the profound depths of maternal love and resilience.

The Complexity of Maternal Love

Literature often grapples with the complexities of maternal love, which can encompass a wide range of emotions from unconditional affection to ambivalence and resentment.

Unconditional Love

Characters like Mrs. Weasley in J.K. Rowling’s “Harry Potter” series exemplify unconditional maternal love. Her fierce protection of her children, and Harry, whom she considers as one of her own, resonates with readers as an idealized depiction of maternal devotion.

Ambivalence and Resentment

However, not all literary portrayals of motherhood are idealized. In “The Awakening” by Kate Chopin, Edna Pontellier’s ambivalence towards her role as a mother highlights the conflict between personal fulfillment and societal expectations. This narrative challenges the notion that maternal love must be unconditional and all-consuming.

Concept of Motherhood in Literary Text: A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

In “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn” by Betty Smith, motherhood is depicted through the character of Katie Nolan, who embodies the themes of resilience, sacrifice, and hope within the challenging context of early 20th-century Brooklyn. Katie’s journey as a mother is central to the novel, showcasing the complexities and multifaceted nature of motherhood.

Resilience and Strength

Katie Nolan is portrayed as a resilient and strong woman, constantly striving to provide for her family despite the harsh conditions of their poverty-stricken environment. Her strength is a cornerstone of her motherhood, as she takes on multiple cleaning jobs to ensure her children, Francie and Neeley, have the essentials they need. This resilience is not just physical but emotional, as she deals with the unreliable support of her husband, Johnny Nolan, whose alcoholism and inability to maintain a steady workplace an additional burden on her shoulders.

Sacrifice

Katie's motherhood is defined by her sacrifices. She often forgoes her comfort and desires to give her children a better life. One poignant example is her practice of saving money in a tin can bank, prioritizing her children's education and future over immediate comforts. Katie's sacrifices are also evident in her emotional life, as she bears the weight of her husband's failures and remains steadfast for the sake of her children. Her willingness to endure hardship and make difficult choices underscores the depth of her love and commitment.

Value of Education

Katie's belief in the power of education is a critical aspect of her approach to motherhood. She is determined that Francie and Neeley will have opportunities she never had. Katie's emphasis on education is a way of empowering her children to break free from the cycle of poverty. She encourages Francie to read and supports her academic aspirations, understanding that knowledge is a vital tool for social mobility and personal growth.

Complexity and Realism

Katie is portrayed with a realistic complexity that adds depth to her character. She is not an idealized mother but a human one with flaws and contradictions. Her strictness and occasional harshness, especially towards Francie, stem from a place of desperation and pragmatic survival. Katie's favoritism towards Neeley and her tough love for Francie reflect the difficult and often unfair decisions she must make under the pressure of their circumstances. This realism in Katie's character highlights the multifaceted nature of motherhood, where love and hardship coexist.

Endurance and Hope

Despite the numerous challenges, Katie maintains a sense of hope and determination. Her endurance is symbolized by the tree that grows in their tenement yard, which thrives against

all odds. This tree represents Katie's hope for a better future for her children and her belief in their potential to rise above their circumstances. Katie's enduring hope is a driving force in her life, fuelling her efforts to provide and persevere.

Maternal Influence

Katie's influence on Francie is profound and lasting. Francie inherits her mother's resilience and strength, qualities that enable her to pursue her dreams and navigate the complexities of life. The bond between Katie and Francie is deep, and the values and lessons imparted by Katie shapes Francie's identity and aspirations.

"A Tree Grows in Brooklyn", motherhood is a rich, complex, and deeply human experience. Katie Nolan's character illustrates the strength, sacrifice, and hope that define motherhood, especially within the context of poverty. Her unwavering commitment to her children's well-being and future underscores the transformative power of a mother's love and resilience. The literary importance of motherhood is vast and multifaceted, encompassing themes of identity, sacrifice, and love. Through its portrayal in literature, motherhood offers profound insights into the human condition, reflecting the complexities and contradictions inherent in this universal experience. From ancient myths to contemporary narratives, the exploration of motherhood continues to evolve, enriching our understanding of what it means to be a mother and, more broadly, what it means to be human. Through the lens of motherhood, literature not only captures the essence of familial bonds but also delves into the broader societal and cultural constructs that shape our lives, making it an indispensable theme in the tapestry of literary exploration.

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