Representations of the Deviant Monstrous Mother in Contemporary American Poetry

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Abstract. The paper aims to characterize the image of the unconventional mother in Western culture; in other words, the bad mother as it is coined and defined by discourses of maternal deviancy. The article provides illustrations of absent, single, and monstrous mothers in contemporary American poetry. It studies how female parents subvert traditional icons of motherhood, either through being an absent or a single mom, and spotlights how such representations correlate with portraits of monstrous mothers and victimized children as well. In this vein, basing on Diana Gustafson's view that the mother could be absent emotionally as well as physically from her children, my study gives accounts of both physical and emotional maternal absence. While Anne Sexton's "The Children" and "The Witch's Life" and Sharon Olds's "Satan Says" and "I go back to May 1937" describe the image of the absent monstrous mother, Olds's "The Victims" and Plath's "Three Women" deal with the figure of the single child-bearer who breaks away from the principles of the institution of motherhood, particularly the ideals of the traditional nuclear family.

Keywords: bad mother, deviant mother, absent mother, single mother, monstrous mother, the traditional institution of motherhood

The myth of the perfect mother has been a symbol to embody and a model to follow by many mothers who are devoted to the standards of self-sacrifice, unshakable maternal love to their children, and domesticity. The good mother, the epitome of the nineteenth-century ideals of femininity and motherhood in Western society, has been valued and celebrated not only by mothers themselves but also by theorists and critics. Yet, women who do not adhere to the image of the domestic, economically dependent, and unconditionally and unambivalently loving mother are supposed to

be beyond the norms of maternal idealism. Western culture, indeed, creates the dichotomy of the good/bad mother and makes up discourses of the good mother as well as discourses of maternal deviancy not only as forms of guidance but also restriction. Along these lines, it has been maintained that

> (…) discourses of maternal deviancy are targeted, albeit differentially, at mothers who do not conform to the script of full-time motherhood and violate the dictated social characteristics, for whatever reason or reasons. Thus, deviancy discourses serve as a means of social control, stigmatizing and punishing women who violate the norms of hegemonic[1] motherhood. (Arendell 1999, 4)

Once she violates the common script, the mother is labelled as deviant and transgressive and even represented as monstrous. In *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*, Barbara Almond argues that "we need mothers so badly, so deeply, that the idea of an unnatural mother is, literally, monstrous" (Almond 2010, 22). In "Monstrous Mothers and the Media", Nicola Goc declares that "mothers continue to be categorised, idealised, and demonised and (…) deviant mothers are understood as monstrous" (Goc 2007, 249). It has been considered since ancient times to the contemporary ones that the ideal traditional mother is associated with images of the Mother-Nature and the angel of the house while the unconventional mother is stereotyped as the monster and the witch.

Yet, the main question that arises at this point is who the deviant mother is. While good mother discourses associate good mothering with "intensive mothering"[2], as it is coined by the American sociologist Sharon Hays in her book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), and particularly with maternal continual presence, discourses of maternal deviancy, however, equate bad mothering with maternal absence. In *Unbecoming Mothers: The Social Production of Maternal Ambivalence*, Diana Gustafson defines "the bad mother [as] the absent mother—absent emotionally or absent physically from her children (…) a woman who lives apart from her birth children

would seem to be the epitome of the bad mother—an unnatural, aberrant women [sic]" (Gustafson 2005, 28). In *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (1977), Elaine Tuttle Hansen interprets this notion as follows:

> The literary theme of absence, or "mother without child", [is] an expansive term encompassing "nontraditional mothers and bad mothers" such as "lesbians, and slave mothers; women who have abortions and miscarriages; women who refuse to bear children, or whose children are stolen from them; and mothers who are . . . sometimes criminals, murderous, prisoners, suicides, time travellers, tricksters, or ghosts". (qtd. in Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010, 13)

Still, it has been established that the image of the bad mother correlates equally with single motherhood generally through the representation of divorced mothers or mothers without marriage. This is mainly due to the fact that single mother family structures contradict with the prevalent prototypical family form where the mother is the basic caregiver and the father is the primary breadwinner. It has been viewed in this vein that "over the last century women classed as 'bad' mothers have fallen into three general groups [including] those who did not live in a traditional nuclear family, which is considered as the most remarked upon and the most clearly unjust" (Taylor and Umansky 1998, 3). Indeed, "women who did not fit the middle-class family ideal of breadwinning father and stay-at-home mother have born the brunt of mother-blaming throughout most of American history" (Taylor and Umansky 1998, 3) for the expected harm they may cause. In "The Construction of Maternal Deviancy in the Context of Divorce", Martha Albertson Fineman hints to the drawbacks of single motherhood on family and society:

> Legal and professional discourses speculate freely about the impact of single motherhood on the institution of the family and ultimately on the fate of our society. We speak of the broken family, the disintegration of the family, the crisis in the family, the unstable family, the decline of the family, and, perhaps inevitably from some perspectives, the death of the family. (Fineman 1995, 124)

Motherhood without men or outside marriage has been commonly viewed as a serious threat to the children's psychological well development and family unity and stability. The absence of the father would deprive him of valuable experiences with his children and weaken their bonds of love and affection, and would instead make the children in full dependence on the mother to serve their demands. Even though it has been widely believed that "as the primary caregiver, the mother is ideally best suited to comprehend her children's needs, to interpret, and respond to their needs intuitively" (qtd. in Kohlman 2013, 213), the role and the presence of the father are still indispensable. As it has been expressed by Fineman, the exclusion of the male parent from family life would lead to its decline and even death. Because the nuclear family constitutes a pillar of society, the mutilation of family ties would result in the dissolution of social connections and ethics.

Images of the absent, as well as single mother, correlate with representations of the bad mother in the Western culture and literary discourse. "The 'Cruel Mother' motif has been a recurrent representation in plays, ballads, poems, and novels for centuries and continues to survive" (Goc 2007, 1). The contemporary American poets Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Sharon Olds use such a motif in their confessional narrative poetic structures. Yet, while Sexton and Plath provide their readers with authentic accounts of their lives as absent mothers who are subject to emotional illness and recurrent hospitalizations, Olds discloses some facts about her mother's attempts to abuse her children and traumatize their childhoods. In contrast to her "weak [and] complicit mother" (Johnson 2002, 157), Olds "reconstruct[s] herself into a fiercely aware and attentive" (Johnson 2002, 156) parent. This woman goes beyond her past trauma and chooses to be "a good-enough mother" (Spurling 1). Still, it would be also crucial to mention that Sexton and Plath have never chosen to be absent; they were rather trapped by emotional imbalance and, subsequently, suicidal fantasies and attempts that distract their attention from their children. The frequent hospitalizations they had for the sake of emotional recovery render

them absent physically and emotionally and, consequently, prevent them from being conventional mothers.

To speak about experiences of maternal deviancy was supposed to be a cultural and topical taboo in the Western society. Sentimentalized images of motherhood and of quintessential maternal love have been constantly publicized, celebrated, and canonized whether in media or literary discourse. Yet, as poets belonging to the confessional school Sexton, Plath, and Olds dared to challenge not only the stylistic conventions of poetry writing that pervaded during the nineteenth and early twentieth century but also the thematic notions of their time through disclosing experiences of bad mothering. They sought to unmask motherhood through their confessional art used as "a means of killing the beasts which are within them, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be haunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed" (Cribbs 2003, 2). Using an emotional tone and autobiographical content, they intended to confide "those 'very difficult feelings' best designated, in the language of psychology, as traumas" (Horvath 2005, 14). These confessionals find in their free-verse lyrics a nest for the display of their traumatic experiences and its accompanying feelings of guilt, regret, shame, and blame for being the absent mother or the victimized child.

As she personally experienced an imbalanced relationship with her daughter, she sought to delineate the outcomes of this inadequate inharmonious bond on children. Sexton's "The Children", from *The Awful Rowing toward God* (1975), illustrates the negative effects of maternal absence and humiliation primarily through the motif of crying. The agonised children, including the persona, are represented as furious alienated creatures who "are all crying in their pens" so that "the surf carries their cries away" but then "pushes [them] back". This highlights the extent to which children's shouts are inescapable and their suffering is unstoppable. Still, the representation of children as devourers through the visual imagery of the "immense" "mouths" that "are swallowing monster hearts" aims to accent how victimisation makes them revenge

against their mothers' atrociousness. To further underline the impact of maternal absence on the emotional and psychological state of children, the latter are depicted as "dying in their pens". In fact, "their bodies are crumbling" and "their tongues are twisting backwards". The kinaesthetic imageries portraying their decayed bodies, curled tongues, and disintegrated thoughts conceive a tragic disconsolate childhood world. Neglected and alienated, they become "old men who have seen too much" of maternal indifference. This poem, loaded with feelings of anguish and destruction, is dedicated by Sexton to herself and other children in order to "stop dying in the little ways" that "murder in the temple". Because the home, supposed to be the natural sphere where mother and child immure together bonded by mutual love and understanding, was a "temple" and a "maze", Sexton "ke[pt] seeking / the exit or the home".

The aberrance and evilness of the maternal figure are depicted through the lexical register of monstrosity suggested not only in "monster hearts" but similarly in "bewitched", "elf", and "awful". The female parent, who is supposed to be the intrinsic source of everlasting instinctive pure love from a traditional perspective of motherhood, is strikingly endowed with uncanny features and weird abilities. The metaphor of the mother as a supernatural being is notably illustrated in the following verses:

> They are bewitched.
> They are writing down their life
> on the wings of an elf
> who then dissolves. (8-11)

The absent monstrous mother is represented as a "witch" and an "elf" that disappears. It has been claimed that just like the dwarf, the elf is "a symbol of ambivalent meaning" (Cirlot 2013). In some cultures, it stands for "mischief" (Olderr 2012, 79). For instance, it has been contended that "the dark elf [is] generally unfavourable and may [even] kill babies" (Olderr 2012, 79). This is more accentuated through the poetic device of rhyme in "life" and "elf".

These words rhyme to produce a harmonious sound effect that counteracts with the harmfulness of the deed. The fanciful mischievous world of fairy tale and witchcraft drawn by the poet seeks to depict the grotesque appearance of the mother in her children's imagination. She is visualised as an outlandish creature that absorbs their thought and drains their energy and life.

Sexton's "The Witch's Life", from *The Awful Rowing toward God* (1975), embodies the devouring mother archetype that is usually depicted in the Greek mythology in images of animals of feminine nature. The poem, indeed, represents the bad mother as "a hermit, / opening the door for only / a few special animals". The metaphor of the hermit is striking in the way it compares the absent mother to an alienated creature living in seclusion. Such a woman accepts only mothers of her kind; which means solitary ones who adopt the hermit life and create their unique isolated world. Indeed, "only [her] books anoint [her], / and a few friends, / those who reach into [her] veins" (17-19). These verses call forth Sylvia Plath's revolutionary words in "Three Women", "it is so beautiful to have no attachments! I am solitary as grass". Because she chooses writing over mothering, she keeps "shovelling the children out, / scoop after scoop" (15-16) and "yell[ing]: Get out of my life!" (7). The poetic persona epitomises the image of the self-interested mother who sacrifices her family for the sake of her own personal and intellectual life, particularly her writing aspirations and friends. The poem spotlights one of the inner conflicts contemporary women often experience, which is that battle between the dualities of creation and procreation, books and babies, and artists and mothers. The poet's entanglement in "the logic of guilt" (Forbes 2004, 231) for the preference of an independent autonomous self and a free-child world is explicitly displayed through the title "The Witches' Life".

Inconspicuously, the image of the wicked mother which contradicts with the legendary figure of Mother Earth is unveiled through the negative stereotype of the witch. Still, the diction of monstrosity in the poem is also conveyed through a list of similes

including, " she had hair like kelp / and a voice like a boulder". The direct comparison of the mother's hair to kelp, defined as "a mass of large seaweeds" (Merriam Webster), and voice to a "boulder", described as a "much-worn mass of rock" (Merriam Webster), evokes an appalling image of hers in the reader's mind. The elements of nature attributed to the mother's body parts and language are ironically used to mock her unnatural savage picture. Still, this aberrant depiction is further accented through these subsequent comparisons:

> Maybe, although my heart
> is a kitten of butter
> I am blowing it up like a zeppelin
> Yes. It is the witch's life. (29-32)

Even though her heart is intrinsically tender and delicate, she blows it up fiercely like a zeppelin, "a rigid airship" (Merriam Webster). The last declarative line is a straightforward affirmation of the persona's awareness of the type of life she lives. It is an assertion filled with regret. Internal self-blame is apparent in the use of the plosives "p", "t", "k", and "b" in "kitten", "butter", "blowing", and "zeppelin", which conveys the speaker's suffocation and uneasiness. In addition, the cheerless monotonous melodic effect, brought through the use of consonance in these words, projects self-indictment. It becomes noticeable how the language of remorse pervades the poem:

> I think of her sometimes now
> and wonder if I am becoming her
> My shoes turn up like a jester's
> clumps of my hair, as I write this,
> curl up individually like toes. (11-15)

The thought that "she is becoming her", the witch, irritates and perplexes her. The kinaesthetic imageries in "the shoes turn[ing] up like a jester's" and "the clumps of hair curl[ing] up individually like toes" further highlight the persona's distress for not being the good

mother she is supposed to be. The verbs "turn up" and "curl up", which denote the abrupt motion of the shoes and hair, connote the unexpected conversion of the mother to a devilish woman and unmask the penance accompanying to that character twist. Although she chooses to be a hermit and to lead a witch's life, she implies self-guilt and blame throughout the lines.

In "I Go Back to May 1937", from *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems 1980-2002*, Sharon Olds goes back to an old picture of her parents before marriage in May 1937 when they were students about to graduate. The mother at that time, before marriage, was described as "dumb" and "innocent". The daughter adores her mom's bygone "hungry pretty face" and "pitiful beautiful untouched body". Yet, once married she is turned into a bad character; an abuser. The speaker in the poem seeks to block the image at that time, May 1937, in order not to witness her mother's transformative behaviours and attitudes toward her new marital life and her descendants. Indeed, the mother is depicted as "the wrong woman" her father is going to marry. She is "going to do bad things to children" that one "cannot imagine [she] would ever do". Here, Olds means by "bad things" those traumatic experiences of her childhood including physical and sexual abuse.

The dual symbolism of stones in the poem is used ironically. In the lines, "see my mother with a few light books at her hip / standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks", the meaning of the "pillar" and "tiny bricks" "centres on ideas of endurance, stability, and permanence [as] they represent the ability to be grounded and connected with the earth" (Morley). This emblem of Mother-Nature, or the mother of humanity, is later mocked in the following lines through an opposing conception:

> take them up like the male and female
> paper dolls and bang them together
> at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
> strike sparks from them. (25-29)

The mother, who is conventionally perceived and appreciated as the pillar of the family and the angel of the house, is envisaged as an evil destructive force. The theme of monstrosity in the poem is revealed through the lexical terminology of fire suggested in "sparks", "light", "bang", and "flint". The comparison of the mother to "a chip of flint" that once rubbed with the father makes "a bang" and "strike[s] sparks" does not only intend to objectify her to flammable material, such as metal or stone, but equally to evoke images of unnaturalness and wickedness. This is likewise plainly visualised through the equation of the mother to an ignitable "paper doll" which defies the traditional archetype of "passive femininity", usually "projected onto female porcelain dolls . . . [or] female paper dolls" (Pavlik-Malone 2018, 9). Through its figures of speech, "I Go Back to May 1937" deconstructs the prevailing version of the unflagging passive, submissive, and doting mother.

The principal character of Satan in Olds's "Satan Says" (1980), which is an incarnation of sin and evil, is a negative image of the bad mother. In addition to the allusions suggested by the title, the deviancy of the mother is hinted to through the diction. She is, indeed, disparagingly designated as a "pimp" and a "cunt". "Satan Says" tells a lot about Olds's tormented experiences of child abuse and her mother's promiscuity. Via her confessional mode, she seeks to go beyond those childhood traumatic incidents. In other terms, she tries to exteriorize "the pains of the lost past and to break the oppression of silence" (Johnson 2002, 158). Yet, her deeply entrenched internalised trauma still confines her in the "closed box redolent of cedar" that has "a gold, heart-shaped lock and no key" and subjugates her to the control and manipulation of the physical and spiritual presence of Satan. The daughter is overwhelmed by the recurrent appearance of the monstrous mother in her mind, epitomised in the poem by Satan. She is affected by his declarations and orders which conjure up ugly memories and stimulate despicable confessions. The lexical register of trauma suggested in "locked past", "lost past", "picture", and "magic", complemented with the terminology of suffering revealed in "sorrow", "dark",

"blackness", and "torture", and the diction of death manifested in "cedar", "wood", "death", and "coffin" emphasise the effects of maternal deviancy on the daughter's psychological balance. She is tortured to death in the cage of distressing retrospection.

Olds's "The Victims", *The Dead and the Living* (1989), encodes a discourse of maternal deviancy as it illustrates instances of mother blame from the perspective of the daughter. The opening lines of the poem, "when Mother divorced you, we were glad. She took it and / took it in silence, all those years and then / kicked you out, suddenly" (1-3), are "references to an act of abuse whether it is physical or verbal or even total silence" (The Victims). The impetuous decision of the mother to divorce the father and to kick him out, which envisages her in the image of an abuser, contradicts with the ideals of marriage and the heterosexual institution of motherhood. By challenging the normative constructions of the traditional nuclear family, the mother is condemned to be deviant for different reasons. The poet delineates how the mother's abrupt preference of single motherhood marks the fate and makes the drama of the whole family. Through "The Victims", Olds underscores the ostensible dangers of divorce including creating crisis of communication between the father and his children. The latter, unaware of the possible threats of their parents' separation on their family cohesion, "loved" and welcomed their mother's alternative in the beginning. They "grinned inside, the way people grinned when / Nixon's helicopter lifted off the south/lawn for the last time". They showed hatred and indifference toward their father as the mother "had taught [them] to take it, to hate [him] and take it / until [they] pricked with her for his / annihilation". Through the representation of the mother not only as an abuser but also a conspirator, Olds intends to underline how deviancy may lead to the victimisation of the children and the father alike, and accordingly to the distortion of the exemplar of the unified nuclear family in Western society. The term "annihilation" plainly stresses Fineman's view of the decline and even the death of the family in the context of divorce.

Like Olds's "The Victims", the third voice in Plath's "Three Women" illustrates the impact of single motherhood on the institution of the family. Yet, while the mother in Olds's "The Victims" decides to exclude the father from family life and to lead it alone, the single progenitor in Plath's "Three Women", the victim of motherhood without marriage, prefers to free the self from all the restraining shackles, and accordingly to quit her offspring. Moments before delivery, she acknowledges that "[she] [is] not ready for anything to happen" and that "[she] should have murdered this, that murders [her]". The following lines further spotlight the image of the unconventional mother:

> I am a wound walking out of the hospital.
> I am a wound that they are letting go.
> I leave my health behind. I leave someone
> who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go. (271-274)

Nevertheless, the theme of maternal absence conveyed through the list of verbs "walking out", "letting go", "leave", and "go", is enmeshed with self-blame. The child-bearer accuses herself of not being the good mother and of abandoning her newly born baby, which is suggested through the repetition of "I am a wound" twice. Still, self-accusation is intensified in the poem through the metaphor of the mother as a "white ship hooting: goodbye, goodbye" in opposition to the comparison of the child to "a small island, asleep and peaceful". These contrastive images attempt to accentuate the motif of monstrosity. The poetic persona becomes a hooting owl, a symbol of horror and evil. In this vein, it is worth noting that such a symbolism has been interpreted differently. It has been claimed that Babylonians describe the hooting owls as "the souls of dead mothers crying for their children" (Conway 2015, 177) while Romans believe that they are "associated with witches because of their . . . haunting cry" (Webster 2008, 192). Indeed, the Romans assume that "witches could change into the form of owls, and in this guise, drank the blood of babies" (Webster 2008, 192). The hooting owl generally presages the "unhappy life" of the child and

"signals [his/her] cries of desperation" (Owl Meaning 2019). The antagonism between the monstrous mother and the innocent victimised baby is later stressed through the metaphor of the latter as "a bird that cries". Despite the fact that she detaches herself physically from her infant, she is still haunted by the "dream of an island, red with cries":

> It is so beautiful to have no attachments!
> I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss?
> Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?
>
> What is that bird that cries
> with such sorrow in its voice?
> I am young as ever? It says. What is it I miss? (433-435, 440-442)

Even though she directly acknowledges the beauty of a child-free world, the list of interrogative questions seeks to emphasise internalised maternal guilt. The frequent use of monosyllabic words such as "so", "no", "grass", "what", "miss", "find", "bird", "cries", "voice", and "ever" project the short intermittent breath of the crying suffocating baby. The third voice in Plath's "Three Women" displays the image of the single absent monstrous mother and elucidates the miserable fate of the child.

In brief, the research paper explores how the maternal personae in contemporary American poetry subvert the traditional norms of the institution of motherhood and represent themselves, according to discourses of maternal deviancy, as deviant either through images of the absent mother, physically and / or emotionally, or images of the single mother who breaks away from the model of the ideal nuclear family. Yet, the third persona in Plath's "Three Women" echoes the voice of the single mother who chooses to be absent both physically and emotionally. Because she could not bear the burden of single motherhood, she abandons her child and prefers to have no attachments. Overall, the representations of unnatural mothers in Plath's, Sexton's, and Olds's poems imply feelings of guilt and remorse and correlate with images of monstrous mothers.

The deviant mother is imaged as a "monster", "elf", "witch", "paper doll", and a "hooting" owl. The devouring mother, the mother-monster, and the witch figure in the studied poems confront the mythical icons of the Virgin Mary and Mother Nature, revealing by that the different maternal representations and mothering ideologies of the poets' times. The maternal personae "are reflective of the larger cultural context, with its unresolved contradictions [and] tensions" (Arendell 8) and their own emotional dilemma within such a context.

NOTES

1. *Hegemonic motherhood* is defined by Teresa Arendell as a "patriarchal construction: it ties women's identities to their roles as child raisers and nurtures of others, more generally (…) hegemonic motherhood remains subordinated to and under the force of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987,1992; see also Arendell, 1995). Hegemonic motherhood regulates and controls women's lives. One avenue for such control is the construction and operation of deviancy discourses (Fineman, 1995; Rothman, 1994; Teghtsoonian, 1996, 1997). (Arendell 1999, 4)
2. Intensive mothering: "As sociologist Hays (1996) articulated, the dominant motherhood ideology in the modern United States is that of intensive mothering. The good mother is focused exclusively on mothering her children and is child-centred, committed to her children in time, energy, and affection (see Benjamin, 1990, 1994; Berry, 1993; Tuominen, 1992, 1994). Self-sacrificing, such a mother is 'not a subject with her own needs and interests'" (Bassin et al., 1994b: 2). (Arendell 1999, 2-3)

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