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0521622808 - Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins

Carolyn Dever

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CHAPTER I

The lady vanishes

I merely desire information. Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus.
Oscar Wilde¹

Our starting-point will again be the one situation which we believe we understand – the situation of the infant when it is presented with a stranger instead of its mother.
Sigmund Freud²

To write a life, in the Victorian period, is to write the story of the loss of the mother. In fiction and biography, autobiography and poetry, the organizational logic of lived experience extends, not from the moment of birth, but from the instant of that primal loss. From *Emma* through *To the Lighthouse*, but most dramatically in the fiction of mid-Victorian Britain, stories of family and individual development, as well as narratives of mystery, intrigue, and desire, almost invariably occur in the immediate context of maternal death or desertion. The significance of maternal loss in the construction of subjectivity, domesticity, and desire, and the ideological implications of this representational practice, are the concerns of this book.

It is paradoxical that the predominant generic template of the nineteenth-century British novel blatantly undermines those ideologies of the family it is commonly thought to uphold. Structured principally *not* as a celebration of family unity, or even of the sanctity of the domestic sphere, the Victorian novel conventionally opens with a scene of family rupture, frequently a maternal deathbed or a tale of wanton maternal abandonment. The scenario is familiar: the narrative will pursue the story of a child or adolescent protagonist who, motherless, is left to decode the mysteries of the world, and most provocatively of the mating-process, alone. I want to suggest that this paradigm opens up a

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series of representational possibilities ranging from the conservative to the radical; in the space of the missing mother, novelists from Austen through Eliot are free to reinscribe the form and function of maternity according to highly idiosyncratic agendas, and thus to reformulate both conventional roles for women and conventional modes of narration.

The structural centrality of maternal loss enables mid-Victorian writers to consider complex questions of female subjectivity and sexuality. And largely because their plots occur in the context of the manifest *failure* – whether willful or not – of successful maternity, this narrative structure addresses larger ideological problems of femininity. Reflecting the structural and thematic patterns of her own fiction as well as her contemporaries', Elizabeth Gaskell, for example, constructs the death of Maria Brontë as the organizing principle, central crisis, and source of dramatic tension in the early chapters of her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. While Gaskell's first chapter climaxes in the graphic reproduction of the Brontë family tombstone in Haworth Church, the first name of that too-long list offers the central trope through which Gaskell structures her version of the Brontë children's youth: "HERE LIE THE REMAINS OF MARIA BRONTË, WIFE OF THE REV. P. BRONTË, A. B., MINISTER OF HAWORTH."³ Thus the young Brontë children, from the first moment of the biography, are characterized as "six little motherless children,"⁴ the eldest, young Maria Brontë, acting in her mother Maria's stead. That mother herself, however, is present in Gaskell's text – and, Gaskell would have it, in her children's lives – as only the vaguest of figures: "according to my informant, the mother was not very anxious to see much of her children, probably because the sight of them, knowing how soon they were to be left motherless, would have agitated her too much."⁵

Elizabeth Gaskell does not argue that Charlotte Brontë's life begins with the death of her mother; rather, it is Gaskell's *text* that requires this event in order to begin. For the specter of the motherless, vulnerable child envisioned so vividly by the dying Maria Brontë is the paradigmatic subject of nineteenth-century British narrative, the ensuing *Bildung* mapping the child's negotiation back into a domestic space – and defining, along the way, the parameters of that domestic space and the male and female subjects that inhabit it. These texts consistently bracket the question of the mother herself as an embodied and vocal human figure; indeed, the ideology of the domestic articulated in the context of maternal loss appears to depend fundamentally on that loss as one of its constitutive principles.

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This narrative structure has far-reaching implications. The consolidation of Victorian subjectivity in the domestic context reaches its most coherent form not in nineteenth-century fiction, but with Freud's appropriation of the *Bildungsroman* as the form structuring "normative" development.⁶ Psychoanalysis, and in particular object-relations theory, provides a useful lens through which to consider the phenomenon of maternal loss in Victorian fiction. However, as I argue in the next chapter, the narrative mode through which Freud structures normative psychoanalytic development is itself a direct reflection of mid-Victorian tropes, with similar representational and ideological investments in maternal loss. In fact, Victorian concern with maternal loss offers psychoanalysis its most basic vocabulary for human development: in psychoanalysis, maternal loss simply shifts from a representational motif to a psychological mandate, as all permutations of mature subjectivity and sexuality emerge from the negotiation of the predicament of "abandonment." From the basic concept of infantile differentiation to the phallic mother and the structure of fetishism, from the inexplicability of female heterosexual desire to the *Unheimlich*, the narrative of "origins" in psychoanalysis begins with the crisis precipitated by the mother as a figure for loss. Whether the "loss" in question is the event of actual maternal death, the recognition of the female genitals as "castrated," or simply the mother's momentary but anxiety-producing absence, the maternal body figures an essential failure: the child, object-relations theorists argue, *must* eventually read the mother as inadequate in order to constitute a subject-position independent of hers. I will argue, then, through the chapters that follow, that the analysis of Victorian fiction has as much to teach us about psychoanalysis as psychoanalysis teaches us about the Victorian novel; indeed, in many instances, Victorian representational paradigms pose provocative and revealing challenges to the narcissistic empire of the psychoanalytic subject.

Mastering abandonment by translating it into renunciation, that subject is eternally engaged in pursuit of the original object, the lost and idealized mother visible only in the negative, in the inadequacies of substitution. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes of the child engaged in the game of *fort-da*, in which the boy constructs his mother's symbolic departure and return; Freud interprets the baby's babble as the German *fort*, or "gone," followed by *da*, or "there":

At the outset he was in a *passive* situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery

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that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not. But still another interpretation may be attempted. Throwing away the object so that it was “gone” might satisfy an impulse of the child’s, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him. In that case it would have a defiant meaning: “All right, then, go away! I don’t need you. I’m sending you away myself.”⁷

The shift from passivity to activity, from victim to master, characterizes the origin of psychoanalytic subjectivity. This is in essence a narrative of revenge, bound to repeat the moment of abandonment in an ambivalent celebration of the triumph of survival. Such a compulsion to repeat, as Freud and later Lacan would have it, characterizes the conditions of subjectivity itself: all objects of desire, all symbols of triumph, exist in a structure referential to this instantiating rupture. Normative subjectivity, in the psychoanalytic model, is articulated through a poetics of loss. And the fundamental lost object is, practically or symbolically, the mother.

The melancholic structure of psychoanalytic subjectivity reflects the poetics of loss that shapes the Victorian narrative tradition. In both genres, narrative dependency on maternal loss displaces or attenuates questions of female sexuality and subjectivity, of infancy and relatedness, and of all that is representationally challenging about the spectacle of maternity itself. In Victorian novels, representations of maternal loss produce structures of displacement and operate as examinations of the objects substituted in the breach: servants and siblings, father, friends, lovers, orphanages, and texts – tombstones, letters, wills – all of which stand in a profoundly secondary relationship to the original lost, maternal object. Paradoxically, perhaps, the powerful Victorian ideal of maternal beneficence is constructed as an untested abstraction that is fundamentally dependent on a context of loss for its articulation.

Indeed, in “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud explicitly links the pathology of melancholia with the normative developmental phase of orality, and through this connection, situates the mother at the epicenter of both. Discussing melancholia, through the work of Otto Rank and Karl Abraham, as a narcissistic disorder characterized by the ego’s inability to forsake a loved object, Freud writes:

This substitution of identification for object-love is an important mechanism in the narcissistic affections . . . It represents, of course, a *regression* from one type of object-choice to original narcissism. We have elsewhere shown that identification is a preliminary stage of object-choice, that it is the first way – and one that is expressed in an ambivalent fashion – in which the ego picks out an object.

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The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it. Abraham is undoubtedly right in attributing to this connection the refusal of nourishment met with in severe forms of melancholia.⁸

The desire to introject the lost object is a symptom of the melancholic subject and the melancholic text alike. Notably, the oral mother-child relationship provides Freud with a template for melancholia: the child's struggle toward individual subjectivity entails the need to separate from the nutritive mother, even as that separation itself entails a potentially devastating loss. The melancholic narrative framework offers a solution to this double bind, a formula for independent subjectivity in which the object of desire is "devoured," metaphorically taken into the body, suspended, protected, abstracted, idealized, and potentially mastered. Freud's theory of melancholia situates loss not in the past, but right in the present, suggesting a logic by which the mother as an artifact is readable in the "present" of a text, even when that narrative's opening trope attempts to contain her in the historical past through the representation of her death. Just as melancholic subjectivity acts under the influence of the introjected idealized object, melancholic narratives, too, take their shape not after that instantiating loss, but precisely *through* it.

Judith Butler pursues Freud's identification of the internalized melancholic object with the construction of an abstract ideal, suggesting in the process a theory that locates loss as fundamental to the codifying tropes of subjectivity:

If melancholia in Freud's sense is the effect of an ungrieved loss (a sustaining of the lost object/Other as a psychic figure with the consequence of heightened identification with the Other, self-beratement, and the acting out of unresolved anger and love), it may be that performance, understood as "acting out," is significantly related to the problem of unacknowledged loss. Where there is an ungrieved loss in drag performance (and I am sure that such a generalization cannot be universalized), perhaps it is a loss that is refused and incorporated in the performed identification, one that reiterates a gendered idealization and its radical uninhabitability.⁹

Butler's mimetic theory turns on a notion of the performative that is pertinent to psychoanalytic and Victorian narratives alike. The "performed identification" that "reiterates a gendered idealization and its radical uninhabitability" presents categories of subjectivity in terms of tropes that are doomed to failure, always demonstrating their inability to achieve an abstract ideal. Identity, in other words, is not natural or grounded; it is a mimetic process constructed in the breach, in an

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attempt to compensate for loss by becoming – through performance motivated by nostalgia – a caricature of the lost object.

Rigidly idealized categories of identity – the Victorian ideal of maternity, for example – depend precisely on the absence and the ineffability of the original model, and thus the trope of maternal absence is one of the most powerful tools in the maintenance of the nineteenth-century maternal ideal. For Victorian narratives so relentlessly invested in the spectacle of maternal loss participate in the construction of a domestic ideology through their introjection of the dead mother, representing that mother in those structures of gender and desire shaped with reference to her disembodied ideal. Butler writes: “In the experience of losing another human being whom one has loved, Freud argues, the ego is said to incorporate that other into the very structure of the ego, taking on attributes of the other and ‘sustaining’ the other through magical acts of imitation.”¹⁰ The “magical acts of imitation” that work so effectively to perpetuate, to reanimate the lost object are the foundational acts upon which Victorian domestic ideologies are constructed. The representation of maternal loss is necessary to the reciprocal emergence of the maternal ideal, cause not effect of a codifying system; indeed, the nostalgia created in the wake of the mother’s death simply increases the urgency with which the text seeks to idealize that lost object.

Victorian dead-mother plots facilitate a number of cultural processes, functioning most prominently, perhaps, as a means of addressing the question of origins in terms at once physical and psychological. Reflecting concerns most famously articulated in *The Origin of Species*, fictional texts in the mid-nineteenth century express the epistemological crisis of origins through the representation of maternal loss, in a translation of Darwin’s phylogenetic theory to an ontogenetic scale. Interestingly, the translation works in reverse, as well: as I will argue below, when Darwin himself reverses the terms of his investigation by returning from phylogeny to ontogeny, describing his *own* origins in his posthumously published *Autobiography*, the death of his mother is the source of the curiosity in the boy that later makes the explorer and naturalist of the man.

As the examples of Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Darwin indicate, the structuring principle of maternal loss operates across conventions of genre. Gaskell’s *Life of Brontë*, like *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters*, is the *Bildungsroman* of a young woman who loses her mother, while Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, like his *Autobiography*, is an attempt to investigate backward, to read history – whether personal or

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that of an entire species – in order to interrogate structures of cause and effect. Consistently, and without regard to genre, Victorian dead-mother texts engage such a reversal of causal and historical conventions. Reading the historical present as the effect of a hidden cause, narratives from *Oliver Twist* to *Daniel Deronda* relentlessly seek that cause – which invariably devolves upon some secret possessed by a strategically missing mother – as a means of decoding the psychological predicament of the protagonist. While Austen's *Emma* and *Persuasion* invoke the trauma of maternal loss as clues to the psychological constitution of their respective protagonists, not until Dickens, first in *Oliver Twist* then more dramatically in *Bleak House*, does maternal loss develop from a structural device to a psychological phenomenon. Consolidating tropes from earlier realist and Gothic conventions of maternal loss, and particularly from the example of Austen, Dickens exploits literary historical precedents that enable the unique and historically specific realization of a maternal ideal achieved in absence.

Dickens's significant contribution here, which is reflected and developed throughout the next forty years of literary history, entails a generic hybrid of mystery narrative and fictional autobiography. Raising the stakes of mystery by mapping it onto the crisis of a young, orphaned boy or girl, Dickens constructs profoundly melancholic biographical narratives, in which the understanding and management of loss is endemic to adulthood. And like the Freudian analytic narrative, in which the forward-looking trajectory of the *Bildung* is crossed with the backward-looking quest for original trauma, Dickens's formal innovation involves such a temporal duality. By psychologizing the detective plot and by making a mystery of the biographical form, Dickens hints at the melodramatic intrigue and transgressive potential lurking even in the most bourgeois lives, such as those of the domesticized *Oliver Twist* and *Esther Summerson*. Within this powerful hybrid genre, "mother" is a synecdoche for physical and psychological origin; by taking her out of the picture, Dickens constructs a crisis in which self-understanding, represented as the ability to craft a coherent life story or autobiography, is entirely dependent on the solution to a mystery. And just as for Freud, for Dickens, all roads return to the missing mother, the only question and the only answer in life stories that are also mysteries.

Such relentless recourse to a mysterious and absent figure underscores the sense in which fiction of this period, beginning most dramatically with Dickens, seeks to place, codify, and occasionally demonize the mother, a task so challenging it is most notoriously effected in the

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near-total absence of actual examples. Historically, the representational paradoxes of maternity were produced by rigid and anxious ethics of motherhood and female decorum. Even from the topmost reaches of Victorian culture, the maternal paradox is clearly visible and begs consideration.¹¹ In mid-Victorian England, the cultural construction of the bourgeois family, and by extension, of middle-class subjectivity, is predicated on a static ideal of maternal subjectivity that trickles down through the ranks from the level of Queen Victoria herself, the woman who “ruled her nation as a mother and her household as a monarch.”¹² Adrienne Munich argues that the coincidence in Victoria of monarch and mother led to iconographic confusion:

Something appears to be wrong at the top of the pyramid of authority. Although an idealized mother, a madonna, is vested with great spiritual authority, unvirginal mothers, unlike fathers, are less imaginable as representing temporal monarchy; maternal monarchy seems absurd. By being so confoundingly physical and fecund, Victoria’s female body does not lend itself to translation as a madonna, to assimilation into a personification, such as Britannia, or to veneration as a moral sage.¹³

The anxiety focused on Victoria, writes Munich, produces an analogy between the Queen’s excessive body and the nation’s excessive empire: “Queen Victoria’s body, loved yet ridiculed, became a representation for the excess of a body politic with the largest circulation in the world.”¹⁴ But the equation of maternal body and body politic fails to address anxieties focused on the issue of excess; dual impulses of expansion and circumscription consistently overwrite representations of the Queen Regnant. The overdetermined identification of Victoria as domestic ideal, as a woman who figures for all women the propriety of “place,” responds precisely to the anxiety of a woman who is clearly and powerfully *out* of place. As a woman on the throne of England, Victoria represents both the desire and the danger of female power taken to its illogical extreme: belonging at once to wife and mother, woman and queen, Victoria’s body must reify the ideal that her position threatens to subvert. Only after the death of Prince Albert is there a successful iconographic resolution to the representational paradox of the Queen/Mother, Munich argues, as virginity is recuperated through the metaphor of widowhood in an idealization of pristine, asexual maternity that reflects an ethical investment similar to that of the melancholic novel. Munich writes: “Despite maternal monarchy’s seeming paradox, the image of the widowed mother solves some of the representational

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difficulties in conceptualizing a Victorian queen. Victoria no longer had to face her problem of anomalous authority in regard to a husband. The Mother Victoria image as a holy mother eventually subsumes, even mutes, that of the wife.”¹⁵

The metaphor of Victoria’s rule within the “home” becomes central to explanations of her role as ruler of the nation, while also lending a vocabulary of maternal sovereignty to more conventional domestic spheres; Victoria, Munich argues, manipulates and capitalizes upon the iconography of maternity as the Angel in the Palace. In his 1864 address “Of Queens’ Gardens,” John Ruskin extends the metaphor of the home toward that of the palace; women are the queens of a domain only literally smaller than the domain of Victoria Regina:

So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise – wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fall from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service – the true changefulness of woman.¹⁶

According to the metaphor Ruskin sets forth here, a system of moral order is dependent on a woman’s entrance into the social contract of subjection, her acceptance of self-renunciation, unerring supportiveness, and modesty. Although all that is “good” and “right” proceeds logically from the structure of maternal virtue, women’s power is necessarily invisible, tangible more in terms of its effects than the immediacy of proximate causality. The virtuous Victorian mother haunts the citizens of mid-century England, male and female alike, a profoundly disembodied voice and a powerfully absent presence. The popular advice writer Mrs. Ellis comments:

It has often been said that no man, however depraved or vicious, need be utterly despaired of, with whom his mother’s influence still lingers on the side of virtue. On the couch of sickness, the battle-field, and even the gloomy scaffold, it is the image of his mother which still haunts the memory of the dying man; and in the hour of strong temptation, when guilty comrades urge the treacherous or the bloody deed, it is to forget the warning of his mother’s voice, that the half-persuaded victim drinks a deeper draught.¹⁷

A culture’s superego, the mother’s influence is ideally strong even – or especially – in her absence. A culture’s ghost, the mother lurks unseen but powerfully heard in the recesses of the Victorian conscience.

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Arguing that Britain's economic, legal, and medical institutions depend on such an ideology of "True Womanhood," Mary Poovey contends that the domestic ideal relies on the censoring of female desire and ambition in favor of "natural" maternal love:

The place women occupied in liberal, bourgeois ideology also helps account for the persistence in the domestic ideal of the earlier image of women as sexualized, susceptible, and fallen. The representation of women not only as dependent but as needing the control that was the other face of protection was integral to the separation of spheres and everything that followed from it, because this image provided a defensible explanation for inequality. If women were governed not by reason (like men), but by something else, then they could hardly be expected (or allowed) to participate in the economic and political fray. Increasingly, from the late eighteenth century, the medical model of reproductive difference was invoked to define this something: when it was given one emphasis, women's reproductive capacity equaled her maternal instinct; when given another, it equaled her sexuality.¹⁸

Poovey suggests that the Victorian medical community's construction of the female body reflects the logic of female disenfranchisement: ruled by their bodies, the medical model suggests, women can be separated from the spheres of politics and intellect – perhaps ironically, considering the status of Victoria Regina. The danger, however, of circumscription predicated on the body is the implication of maternal embodiment as an eroticized spectacle. Poovey describes an important distinction between the cultural construction of maternal instinct as "natural" and that of female sexuality as perverse, dangerous, and uncontrollable. This distinction illustrates the fault-line of a central ideological paradox. Mid-Victorian representations of the domestic ideal exist in proportion to anxieties about the opposite, the image of the sexualized, susceptible, fallen woman; the doubleness that inheres within representations of that domestic ideal, therefore, signals a complexity of representational concerns challenged by stereotypes of Victorian maternity. The index entry for "Woman" in Walter E. Houghton's historical study, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, reads, "See also Family, Home, Marriage, Purity."¹⁹ This belies the period's concern – represented consistently and aggressively in its narrative fictions – with women's implication in orphanage, anomie, illegitimacy, and sexual transgression.

Narratives of mortality are central to medical discourses of maternity, and especially of childbirth, and these narratives negotiate the fine line between the canonization of the mother and their engagement with the material and often horrifying implications of her embodiment. But