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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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The cultural ideal of motherhood in Victorian Britain seems to be undermined by Victorian novels, which almost always represent mothers as incapacitated, abandoning, or dead. Carolyn Dever argues that the phenomenon of the dead or missing mother in Victorian narrative is central to the construction of the good mother as a cultural ideal. Maternal loss is the prerequisite for Victorian representations of domestic life, a fact which has especially complex implications for women. And when Freud constructs psychoanalytic models of family, gender, and desire, he too assumes that domesticity begins with the death of the mother. Analyzing texts by Dickens, Collins, Eliot, Darwin, and Woolf, as well as Freud, Klein, and Winnicott, Dever argues that fictional and theoretical narratives alike use maternal absence to articulate concerns about gender and representation. Psychoanalysis has long been used to analyze Victorian fiction; Dever contends that Victorian fiction has much to teach us about psychoanalysis.

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FROM DICKENS TO FREUD

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly syntheses and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as “background,” feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have re-activated the field.

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# DEATH AND THE MOTHER FROM DICKENS TO FREUD

*Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins*

CAROLYN DEVER

*New York University*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
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*For Kathryn*

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The ideal mother is the ghost that haunts the Victorian novel. Paradoxically, the world of Victorian fiction, so preoccupied with women's power in the context of the domestic sphere, only rarely embodies that power in the figure of a mother. Instead, Victorian novels almost invariably feature protagonists whose mothers are dead or lost, swept away by menacing and often mysterious outside forces. The maternal ideal in fiction thus takes its shape and its power in the context of almost complete maternal absence, and I would argue, through the necessary vehicle of such a void. This is a book about representations of the loss of the mother, about the ambivalent compensatory structures that emerge in the wake of her departure, and finally, about the revealing disruption of those structures at the inevitable point at which the repressed returns.

The mid-nineteenth century is a period in which narrative fictions and rhetorics of the maternal ideal flourish side by side. It is surely noteworthy, then, that the maternal ideal *within* narrative fictions is a rule honored more often in the breach: the predominant domestic topos in the Victorian novel is a family represented in terms of maternal death or desertion. The mother's absence creates a mystery for her child to solve, motivating time and again the redefinition – in the absence of role-models – of female decorum, gender roles, and sexuality. In the absence of the mother, the child is left with a personal mystery, too, that motivates a formal search for “origins” in narratives ranging from the orphan discovering the truth of family history to the natural philosopher explicating, in somewhat larger terms, the origin of species.

The iconography of the maternal ideal achieves its cultural power through a poetics of abandonment and ambivalence, as the representational conundrum of the eroticized adult female is accommodated in the disguise of a dead – and therefore virtuous, pure, noble, and true – mother. And symbolically within fictional worlds, the crisis of maternal loss enables the synthesis of questions of originality, agency, erotic and

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scientific desire, returning always to a point of ending that becomes, generically, the point of beginning. The mother is the actual and symbolic site of generation, the earliest influence on development, and the domestic anchor of the most basic socioeconomic unit; she is central to the emerging theories of Darwin, Freud, and Marx – yet throughout nineteenth-century narratives she is almost always already gone. Domestic and detective fictions, scientific and political concerns converge in the maternal quest, as texts ranging from *Oliver Twist*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Middlemarch* to *The Origin of Species* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* return again and again to the space, the problem, of the mother who is not there.

The narrative structure that follows maternal loss proves profoundly influential over the course of the nineteenth century, describing the melancholic construction of an ideal through the loss of the living object, the embodied mother. The most immediate beneficiary of this narrative structure is Freud: in his theories of subjectivity, Freud presents the metaphor of maternal loss as the prerequisite for adult subjectivity and “normative” sexuality, reading all relationships of desire as repetitions of the original trauma of lost love, separation from the mother. Psychoanalytic methodologies as well as narrative forms are structurally dependent on the symbolic figure of the missing mother, and the implications of this fact are developed in post-Freudian object-relations theories that situate the mother, rather than the father, at the center of erotic and developmental pathologies. While this book offers a psychoanalytic perspective on Victorian fiction, it also considers the shaping influence of Victorian fiction on psychoanalytic theories of gender, language, and desire, exploring, in both genres, the impulse to construct the origins of subjectivity in the event of maternal loss.

In the two introductory chapters that follow, I consider the cultural, historical, and literary contexts that produce Victorian and psychoanalytic narratives so preoccupied with motherless children. Within the development of the Victorian novel, as within the institutional history of psychoanalysis, the ideological stakes of maternal loss are revealed most dramatically in the context of startling and unexpected events of maternal return. Thus from popular fiction to Victorian obstetrics, from Freud’s “*fort-da* game” to Melanie Klein’s theory of the “epistemophilic impulse,” I read maternal absence as a dynamic signifying presence that exposes issues at stake in the containment of all that is potentially transgressive in the mother embodied.

Pursuing the implications of Freudian and object-relations paradigms

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in the chapters that follow, I argue that Victorian novels that represent the *return* of the missing mother after staging her death or disappearance enact subversive responses to the social, psychological, and narrative structures consolidated through her loss. The emphasis on the mother's return suggests a challenge to the psychoanalytic models of subjectivity predicated on the ideal of maternal absence, revealing the insistence of maternal embodiment, agency, and subjectivity. Predicting the fate of D. W. Winnicott's ideal "good-enough" mother, the more aggressively the mother returns, the more aggressively she challenges exclusionary structures of signification and narrative. The narrative *fort-da* of disappearance and return troubles the cultural ideal of the good mother even as it galvanizes a continued fascination with the mother as the central object of desire.

The novels I examine in detail, Dickens's *Bleak House*, Collins's *The Woman in White*, and Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, each invoke the formal structures of fictional autobiography and detective novel; Dickens, Collins, and Eliot deploy the device of maternal absence in order to exploit its formal and psychological possibilities. In each of these texts, maternal loss prompts anxieties that undermine a protagonist's efforts to construct an identity, to consolidate a life story; it therefore motivates the act of detection. The function of maternal absence, and even more problematically, the function of maternal return, indicate a crisis of origin that is configured as a crisis of causality. But as the autobiographical narrative of Esther Summerson in Dickens's *Bleak House* suggests, the agendas informing the retrieval of a lost mother complicate the relationship between autobiography and causality. In Wilkie Collins's "detective" novel *The Woman in White*, the mother functions as an embattled signifier of stability; the progress of the detective plot maps the unraveling of a maternal ideal in exchange for a notion of the mother as the source of debilitating secrets and transgression. In contrast, George Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, describes a narrative world in which all characters construct the terms of desire as longing for a lost mother. The figure of the mother is implicated in a deconstruction of gender roles, erotic object choice, and empowerment; her return represents the final collapse of the fictional frameworks supporting bourgeois ethics of Victorian maternity.

I further pursue the ideological formulation of "origin" through an analysis of *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, in which the politics of originality emerge through Darwin's construction of the origin of both species and individual as a male parthenogenetic transaction. My con-

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clusion turns to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, arguing that Mrs. Ramsay's death marks Woolf's consolidation of Victorian and psychoanalytic plots. Through Woolf, the concerns of this project come full circle, returning to the introductory tensions between Victorian and psychoanalytic narratives, between mothers and melancholia, between maternal loss and the politics of representation.

This book has several central goals: to analyze a symptomatic structure ubiquitous in Victorian narrative; to address the implications of psychoanalytic appropriations of this story; and to place these fictional and theoretical narratives in a continuum that demonstrates larger cultural anxieties about the function of gender in the construction of origins. I am concerned not only with the understanding of a powerfully central figure in Victorian fiction, but also with the pursuit of this figure through the discourses that have shaped ideas of normative development, gender roles, and sexuality. These narratives tell the story of the "maternal death" at the beginning of every life. Considered together, they reveal a great deal about one another, as well as about the ideological implications of a maternal ideal paradoxically strongest in its absence.

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## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

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