

# “What is to be a ‘Mother?’”—An Exposition of “Non-biological Mothers” in Literary Texts

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Received: December 29, 2015 Accepted: January 27, 2016 Online Published: February 26, 2016

doi:10.5539/ells.v6n1p75 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v6n1p75>

## Abstract

This paper investigates the identity formation of “non-biological mothers” in a sample of texts which include primarily “The Caucasian Chalk Circle” by Bertolt Brecht, “Wuthering Heights” by Emily Brontë and “Eveline” by James Joyce. Three characters are selected from the works who perform the role of “mother” at different levels for children who are “biologically” not their own. In Brecht’s play, Grusha cares for the child that is left by his own mother. In Brontë’s novel, Nelly Dean looks after both Hareton and Junior Catherine, children who have lost their “biological” mother, as well as Heathcliff who is brought to the house as an orphan. In Joyce’s short story, Eveline performs the role of mother and remains in Dublin defying her boyfriend’s attempts to take her away to possible happiness in a faraway land. In the study, these three figures and their role as “mother” are the primary focus. However, characters such as the first wife of Okonkwo in “Things Fall Apart” by Chinua Achebe and Anna-Maria in “A Doll’s House” by Henrik Ibsen are also be examined to understand how women who have their own children, become committed towards children who are “biologically” not their own. The study elucidates the way this role of “non-biological mother” is constructed in various literary contexts and more specifically how these “non-biological mothers” are not recognized and their love regarded as subservient to the “love” of the “biological mother”. A textual analysis of texts is used to interpret these characters in their specific literary settings. In this manner, the study promotes a re-reading of the role of “non-biological mothers” and re-interprets the socio-political implications of the role of “mother” as well as the concept of “motherhood”.

**Keywords:** non-biological, mother, literary contexts, role, identity

## 1. Introduction

The theme of love is one of the most hackneyed and popularized themes in literature, and from the various forms of love discussed in literature, it is “romantic love” which has the most appeal among readers. For instance, in Emily Brontë’s “Wuthering Heights”, Catherine declares her love for Heathcliff in the following manner, “he shall never know how I love him; and that, not because he is handsome, Nelly, but because he is more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same” (p. 98). “My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it, I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath...I am Heathcliff – he is always always in my mind” (p. 98). In the same vein, the concept of “mother’s love” also has been an important theme in many literary works produced in both western and eastern communities. In this regard, it is interesting that many of the writers who discuss mother’s love have prioritized the love of a mother who loves her biological child while having a biological obligation towards their “own” child. But then, what about a woman who loves a child who is not biologically her “own” in the same capacity as a biological mother does? Isn’t it the most sacred form of love in existence since such “mothers” do not have a biological obligation and attachment to the child. Although this form of love is prevalent in the world and literature, understated and not recognized in the way it should have been. Love is an abstract concept which cannot be evaluated in relation to degree. However, if it could be in some way or another, the love of “non-biological” mother is the “best” as it is more sacrificing. This paper examines the love of such “non-biological mothers” (Note 1) who love the children who are not their “own” in the same or more capacity as a “biological” mother does towards her child.

As a research area, the concept of “non-biological mother” has so far eluded the mainstream research concern. However, the concept of motherhood has been largely explored in feminist theory in general. In the following section, some of the theoretical perspectives, issues which form the study will be briefly discussed.

## 2. Literature Review

Letherby (1999) points out that motherhood is an ideal and illustrates the different status enjoyed by biological mothers and non-mothers. In his view, a non-mother is stigmatized and denigrated in society. In fact, he adds that, “women who achieve motherhood following ‘infertility’/‘involuntary childlessness’ (particularly social rather than biological motherhood) still feel that they do not meet the ideal”. While this study focuses on the discrimination between the non-mothers and biological mothers, in another interesting study, Giardino et al. (2008) examine whether teen mothers and adult mothers feel differently about infant cries and the results indicated that there was no difference in relation to the maternal feeling of teen and adult mothers. This means that motherhood is not determined by the fact of having experience as a biological mother, giving birth to and raising children in an appropriate age with certain degree of maturity. In a much earlier study, Badinter (1981), points out how the motherhood is in fact a construct or a “myth” and in his study, he provides an historical view of the maternal instinct. The concept of mother or the definition of a mother is problematized by Letherby (1994) by focusing mainly on feminist theory, research and personal experience with specific reference to the experience of nonmotherhood. Glen, Chang and Forcey (1994) in fact claim that during most of the twentieth century, an idealized model of motherhood, derived from the situation of the white, American, middle class, was projected as universal. In particular interest to the present study, they illustrate how in this popularized model the responsibility for mothering rests almost exclusively on one woman (the biological mother), for whom it constitutes the primary if not the sole mission during the child’s formative years. In this manner, the concept of motherhood itself appears to be a social construct engendered by society and as a result, the notion of a non-biological mother should be treated as in par with or even more elevated than that of a biological mother since a non-biological mother, as she cares for children who are not of her own blood, undertakes a responsibility that is commonly perceived to be that of a biological mother, who has legitimacy for being a “mother” due to her “biological” role.

## 3. Methodology

This concept of the love of “non-biological mothers” is discussed in the paper primarily in relation to three literary works, i.e. Emily Bronte’s “*Wuthering Heights*”, Bertolt Brecht’s “*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*” and James Joyce’s “*Eveline*”. In addition, two “mothers” who nurture children “biologically not their own” while having their own children are also examined in the study.

The primary data analysis method of the study is textual analysis in which the portrayal of the characters concerned is closely analyzed in relation to their role as “non-biological mothers” in the selected texts.

The three characters that the paper discusses are extremely sacrificing in nature. Grusha and Eveline are more fortunate in one way because they are in love. It is also apparent that Grusha’s lover, Simon Sashava and Eveline’s lover, Frank both seem to be committed in their love. But Grusha and Eveline give priority to their roles as “non-biological mother”. In contrast, Nelly Dean does not have a lover and is committed to her “non-biological children” and this may be due to the fact that she is merely a governor/servant in the household and Victorian society itself did not expect its servants to be in love.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1 Nelly Dean (“*Wuthering Heights*”)

Emily Bronte’s “*Wuthering Heights*,” which is a masterpiece in English literature is woven around the theme of love in its different aspects. For instance, it is a story where characters “fall in love” for different reasons ranging from status, good looks to “love at first sight” and even in relation to love between Catherine Senior and Heathcliff which possesses a love that unites their very souls. However, though underestimated in mainstream literary criticism, Nelly Dean’s role as a “non-biological mother” especially for Heathcliff, Catherine Junior and Hareton cannot be ignored. The question arises whether this attachment of Nelly Dean for children who are not her own “biological children” is less than the love of a “biological mother”.

Nelly Dean is the housekeeper of Thruscross Grange, where the Earnshaw family resides, and she is more of a friend than a servant in the household. In fact, she is educated and knowledgeable and claims that she has read every book in the library of the house (p. 76). She is the main narrator of the story and the responsibility of the “mother” comes to her accidentally. Both the mothers of Hareton and Junior Catherine die the same day these two children are born. In fact, in her own words, she describes how the responsibility of Hareton was thrust upon

her, “the child, Hareton fell wholly into my hands” (p. 79). Interestingly, Nelly’s role as the “non-biological mother” of Hareton is significant because while she raises him up with motherly affection she also has to play the role of a “protector” as she has to protect him from his own “biological father”, Hindley. This is exemplified on one occasion in the novel where Nelly receives a beating in the hands of Hindley preventing him from suffering the same fate. Her tremendous physical harassment is apparent in the following lines, “‘There, I’ve found it out at last!’ cried Hindley, pulling me back by the skin of my neck, like a dog”. She is defiant and is willing to suffer even death to protect the boy, “I’d rather be shot if you please” (p. 89). “He held the knife in his hand, and pushed its point between my teeth” (p. 89).

She plays the “typical mother’s role” as well. In one instance she rocks little Hareton to sleep, “I was rocking Hareton on my knee, and humming a song...” (p. 92).

Nelly is the “non-biological mother” of Junior Catherine as well. Junior Catherine becomes so attached to Nelly Dean that she treats her as her confidante and come to Nelly Dean for her every need. This attachment can be seen in the following lines, “She [Catherine] sprang forward, and bursting into tears, threw her arms around my neck. Well Ellen, I’m so afraid of you being angry...” (p. 301). In this instance, Catherine’s concern for Nelly Dean’s feelings illustrates her strong attachment to Nelly.

The intensity of Nelly Dean’s love for Catherine is apparent when she confronts Heathcliff and stubbornly claims “I must remain with my mistress. To mind your son is not my business” (p. 328).

As any mother would, Nelly Dean is thrilled to see her “children” married happily. When Hareton and Catherine Junior are to be married, she exclaims, “the crown of all my wishes will be the union of those two; I shall envy no one on their wedding day – there won’t be a happier woman than myself in England” (p. 386). These words exemplify the depth of her love for these two children who are not “biologically not her own”.

#### 4.2 *Grusha (“The Caucasian Chalk Circle”)*

“The Caucasian Chalk Circle” by Bertolt Brecht is a revolutionary drama in its thematic as well as character development. All the main characters are common people from lower rungs of society. In fact Grusha, the protagonist of the story is a kitchen maid at the Governor’s palace and she is a very good example of a “non-biological mother”. Like Nelly she has to play the role of the mother by accident but she willingly takes the responsibility of taking care of the child as she could not make up her mind to leave the child. Her words, “He looks at me! He’s human!” (p. 38) highlight the fact that as she is a human being, she thinks of her “human responsibility” and her commitment to the child is more significant because at a war situation people tend to behave like beasts. In fact she makes the decision even to look at the abandoned child despite of the repeated warnings of her fellow companions. “Do not look at him. You are a fool” (p. 38). In fact, Grusha claims that she takes the child thinking of her human responsibility, “Since no one else will take you, son, I must take you. Since no one else will take you, son, You must take me” (p. 52). These words echo the strong bond between Grusha and the child. This same idea is expressed when she steps on the rotten bridge and claims that “We belong together. (To the CHILD) ‘Live together, die together.’” (p. 55).

Grusha develops such an intense attachment to the child and she makes remarkable sacrifices for the child. On one of the earlier occasions in the drama, she sacrifices a week’s pay for a drop of milk for the child. However, she makes more serious sacrifices much later in the drama. For instance, at one point in the drama, one of the iron shirts inquires whether it was her own child and she admits that it is but when she does that, her fiancée, Simon leaves. Here she has to pretend that the child is hers in order to safeguard the child but as a consequence, she loses her love, which means her future.

Grusha’s ultimate test comes at the end of the play with the famous chalk circle scene where she has to battle for the custody of the child with the child’s “biological mother” who abandoned him in the first place. At this very important juncture of the play, the First Lawyer comments on Mother’s love (p. 113) “High Court of Justice, of all ties the ties of blood are strongest. Mother and child—is there a more intimate relationship? Can one tear a child from its mother? ...she has carried it in her womb. She has fed it with her blood...” (p. 113).

The irony of these words is felt when the second lawyer inadvertently refers to the “real” intentions of the “real” mother of the child and these words illustrate her mercenary nature: “It’s outrageous the way this woman is being treated! Her husband’s palace is closed to her! The revenue of her estate is blocked, and she is cold-bloodedly told that it’s tied to the heir. She can’t do a thing without that child. She can’t even pay her lawyers!” (p. 114).

Grusha decides to fight till the end for her adopted child “I won’t give him up. I’ve raised him, and he knows me” (p. 120)

“I brought him up! Shall I also tear him to bits? I can’t!” This shows the fact that bringing up creates a stronger tie than mere delivering a child. As demonstrated in this example, the biological mother Natella, the Governor’s wife, pulls the child so hard simply because she is not pulling the child but pulling wealth (this confirms what was stated by the second lawyer). It is evident that Grusha loves the child more than the Governor’s wife does, as it is a love based her strong relationship with the child and this is why she releases the child in the chalk circle. This illustrates that mother-child relationship does not completely depend on the fact giving birth to a child but the way you look after the child.

#### 4.3 *Eveline (Eveline)*

In order to elaborate on the concept of non-biological mother, the third character the paper focuses on is Eveline, who is the protagonist of the short story of the same title included in the short story collection, “Dubliners” by James Joyce. Due to the untimely death of her mother, Eveline has to become the “mother” in her household with a thoroughly irresponsible father who reiterates that Eveline has no head and he does not give his hard earned money to throw on the street. Eveline obviously plays four roles in this household; daughter, house keeper, a bread-winner and mother. The difficulties she faces in her life as a result of these roles is succinctly captured by the following words, “she had hard work to keep the house together and to see that the two young children who had been left to her charge went to school regularly and got their meals regularly. It was hard work—a hard life...” (Joyce, 1993, p. 45). Wordsworth Edition. At the same time, she is a victim in diverse ways. She is a victim at home as she undergoes the father’s violence. It is said that she even gets palpitations at home when she is reminded of it. At work place too she is a victim as she is criticized and ill-treated by her employer Ms. Gaven. She is victim as a result of urbanization and industrialization too. Though she has a lover and a family, it is apparent that she is lonely and isolated in her society. This situation of her as a victim at diverse ways makes her role as a “non-biological mother” more significant as her role is not affected by these unfavourable circumstances that she has to undergo.

It is interesting that these four roles that Eveline performs are interconnected. While her role as the mother stands tall, she has to be a breadwinner as well as a house keeper in order to fulfill her obligations as the mother in the best manner possible. The short story is replete with innumerable sacrifices she makes because of her realization of her role as the mother. For example, she earns money as the breadwinner of the family and “she always [gives] her entire wedges—seven shillings” (p. 44).

The main relationships that are focused on the short story are the relationships Eveline has with her mother, the father and her lover, Frank. However, a very important understated relationship is Eveline’s love for the two younger siblings which may possibly be the reason for her not to leave Dublin and her family. She, like Grusha and Nelly, sacrifices her own happiness for the sake of the “non-biological” mother’s role. She is traumatized by the weight of the responsibility thrust upon her shoulders, which is exemplified by the words, “All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart” (p. 48). Yet, she decides to stay behind and commit herself to her role.

The three characters discussed in the paper, Nelly, Grusha and Eveline are all similar as they are “non-biological mothers” who are all unmarried, and apparently not given birth to children. However, when the discourse of “non-biological mother” is analyzed in depth, it is possible to find “biological mothers”, i.e. who have given birth to children, but who still become mothers to children of not their own. In this paper, only two such characters are analyzed and rather interestingly, they are both minor characters. These are the first wife of Okonkwo in “Things Fall Apart” Achabe and Anna-Maria, the nurse of “A Doll’s House” by Henrik Ibsen.

#### 4.4 *The First Wife of Okonkwo (“Things Fall Apart”)*

In Achabe’s “Things Fall Apart”, even the most insignificant and minor characters are specifically identified with names. However, the first wife of Okonkwo is not identified by a name but is referred only as “the first wife”. In that manner, she is given a unique place in the novel as she is elevated to the state of a representative and the reader is encouraged to think of her as “the mother” in the family and because of that reason, she does not need a name. For example, when Ikemefuna is brought to Okonkwo’s household, it is she who looks after him as one of her own children. In fact Ikemefuna thinks of Okonkwo’s house as his own “home” and treats her as his “own mother” as the time goes on because of this affection he receives in the house of Okonkwo. “Ikemefuna had begun to feel like a member of Okonkwo’s family” (p. 51). When she gets to know that Ikemefuna is taken away to be killed, she drops her pestle and says “poor child” (p. 52) which illustrates her love for this child who came from Mbaino as compensation for a crime by clansmen from his village.

In another instance, she feeds the two children of the third wife, Ojiugo, who has rather irresponsibly gone to plait her hair. In fact, when Okonkwo inquires from her whether Ojiugo had asked her to feed the children before she had gone, she lies and says yes. So in this regard, even without being asked, she feeds Ojiugo’s children,

which illustrates her motherly figure and she becomes a “non-biological” mother for Ikemefuna and the rest of the children who come in her way.

#### 4.5 Anna Maria (“A Doll’s House”)

“A Doll’s House” is a revolutionary drama by Henrik Ibsen as it is one of the first works to explore issues related to male dominance and overt as well as subtle discrimination against women as subservient to men. Here, Anna-Maria is a minor character who gets into trouble because of the irresponsibility of men at that time. Her own words echo this fact, “that blackguard of a man never did a thing for me” (p. 60). First of all she had to leave her own “biological” child in the hands of strangers and come to Nora’s house to earn money to provide for her “own” child. But there she became a very loving and doting mother to Nora, who had lost her mother as a child. Nora’s own words confirm this matter, “Dear old Nanny, you were a wonderful mother to me when I was little” (p. 61). Then Anna-Maria says that “she [Nora] hadn’t any mother but me” (p. 61). In this manner, she had to abandon her role as a “biological” mother and take the role of the “non-biological mother” and interestingly she loves Nora as she would have loved her own child.

Anna-Maria’s role as a “non-biological mother” is recognized by Nora as well. It is also apparent that Nora’s ultimate desertion of her children, a monstrous, heartless and irresponsible act subjected to be criticism by her society is less heartless and monstrous in the context of her awareness that Anna-Maria will look after her children in her absence. In fact, at one point in the drama, she suggests that Anna-Maria would make a good mother for her children as she was a wonderful mother to her as well. “And if *my* babies hadn’t any mother, I know you’d...” (p. 61).

### 5. Conclusion

In this paper, five different characters from various literary genres as well as periods in literature were selected and discussed; Nelly Dean and the first wife are from novels but the former belongs to a Victorian novel whereas the latter belongs to a post-colonial novel. Then Grusha and Anna-Maria are from dramas but Grusha belongs to a Modernist play of epic theatre while Anna-Maria belongs to a feminist play which is also defined as a problem play and a modern tragedy. Then Eveline is from a short story. Though these characters are diverse, they are common in relation to the concept of “non-biological mother”. The rationale for the discussion of this concept by focusing on these five characters from different genres and periods was to provide a heightened sense of the importance of the role of “non-biological mother” which is underappreciated in mainstream literary discussion. The paper was not based on feminist theory where the marginalized role of a woman is the focal point but instead attempted a re-reading of the role of “non-biological mothers” and their importance in the interpretation of the mother role which is considered sacred, pure and noble. The paper does not devalue in any means the central role a “mother” plays in raising her own “biological” children, but it demands a re-evaluation of the “non-biological mother’s role” and emphasizes that due place is guaranteed to “non-biological mothers” in literature as well as in society.

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### **Note**

Note 1. Note by the writers: In this paper, we do not refer to the mother roles in the same-sex marriages where the term "the other mother" is used.

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