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Parenthood in English Literature

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Parenthood as a Theme in English Literature

“Parenthood” has been defined as a process of bearing or adoption, and rearing of children. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the concept as “the state of one that begets or brings forth children”. According to contemporary standards, “parenthood” involves a number of daily responsibilities, and financial and affective obligations such as the education and instruction of one's children. The notion of “parenthood” also presupposes an active concern for a child's welfare, physical and intellectual development. Initially, parenthood was concerned with teaching the taboo, with what is forbidden, and with inculcating the basic rules and restrictions to the young. Later on, parenthood began to be seen as a longer process of nurturing. It was increasingly centred on the concept of caring. Such was the case of certain utopian societies founded on the American continent (e.g. the Owenite societies of the 19th century) which developed some of the first kindergartens. Children were raised and educated together and society itself was engaged in a collective effort of parenting. The same concept was developed in Europe almost at the same time (Germany, ca. 1840). In fact, defining “parenthood” itself is a recent preoccupation but the concerns and worries of parenthood are as old as the world.

As early as the 440^{ies} BC, the Greek tragedian Sophocles produced a series of plays – *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. Without mentioning “parenthood” explicitly, the plots of the trilogy develop a familial tragedy, based on a hereditary curse, and discuss the problems of knowledge, ignorance, destiny and personal choice as related to the denial/rejection of parenthood and abandonment. Oedipus is a victim, an abandoned child, threatened with death by his father, while Antigone is the daughter of the incestuous relationship between Oedipus and his mother Jocasta. Epitomising the major family taboos, the figure of Oedipus is extensively referred to in child psychology since S. Freud explored the myth in the light of a father and mother's unconscious feelings regarding the early stages of parenthood. Antigone, on the other hand, is in total opposition to the will of the king. She acts against the orders of the “parent” of the nation, obeying her instinct of filial duty. It has also been suggested that her name means “opposed to

motherhood". Her behaviour engenders destruction, while the outcome of the tragedy implies that there are different levels of parental allegiance.

In the same fashion, English literature of the 16th and 17th centuries was concerned with the structure of the world as God's supreme creation and introduced a complex layered structure of parent-child relationships. The political and religious climate favoured Biblical examples of parenthood – the attempted sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham is a case in point. It demonstrated that God was the father of humanity and that humanity was to obey. Humanity's allegiance to God was likened to a child's obedience to its parents. This reasoning was a part of what is known as "the great chain of being", a conception of the world as a strictly hierarchical system composed of intricate links and interactions. It was frequently alluded to in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and it was also much utilized by Shakespeare in his tragedies, among which *Romeo and Juliet* (1591 – 95) and *Hamlet* (1599 – 1601). Both plays introduce us to a host of strict, forbidding parents whose word is law. Every opposition to their wishes on the domestic or public level has diverse implications on the scale of the great chain of being. Hamlet's revolt brings political change and *Romeo and Juliet's* deaths launch a breach of succession. The authority of parenthood in both plays is the highest authority conceivable. In *Macbeth*, on the other hand, the fear of disobedience to the king is essentially a fear of causing disbalance on a natural and divine level. The fragile balance of power is disturbed by the murder of the kingdom's wise and just parent and nature itself demonstrates its fury at the deed.

The 18th century was the century of Reason. Conceptions of parenthood were significantly modified. The anxiety and the fear of confrontation were transposed from the level of the state to that of the family cell. The notion of effective parental control to be exercised on the child's development gradually emerged. On the one hand, conduct and didactic books were very common throughout the 18th century and well into the 19th. These were written for both parents and children. The correct methods for educating one's children and the basics of good behaviour in society were their main concerns. On the other hand, a strong tradition of educational theory was founded with

the publication of John Locke's *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1692) and it spread to the writings of Defoe (e.g. *The Family Instructor*, 1715), of A. L. Barbauld (*Early Lessons*, 1781), of the Edgeworths (e.g. *Parent's Assistant*, 1796 and *Practical Education*, 1798), and of many minor authors of the late 1780s and the 1790s. An interesting but also extreme example is the moralizing of the notorious Thomas Day (*Sandford and Merton*, 1783 – 89) who adopted two sisters with the hope of raising one or the other as his wife. His purpose was to instil in their minds all the characteristics that made the perfect woman as he saw her. Rumours of mistreatment and even torture were circulated and he abandoned the experiment.

In 1719, Daniel Defoe published his *Robinson Crusoe* and suggested that a child's flight from paternal authority and protection is not a solution. His economic man established a new paternalistic state and the father-son relationship between Crusoe and Friday have been transposed as economic, political and social ideals. Actually, they can be interpreted as a simulation of perfect, natural parenthood. Crusoe enlightens Friday on moral and religious matters, while Friday demonstrates submission to his spiritual parent. Twenty years later, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* develops a very interesting form of passive parenthood. It insists on the fact that even though outside the sphere of parental protection, the virtuous offspring should follow the moral principles of her parents in her quest for happiness. In a series of letters, Pamela complains of the treatment she receives only to be rewarded by matrimonial happiness and parenthood herself.

The later 18th and earlier 19th centuries saw the rise of new fears and quite a few redevelopments of the incest taboo, a widespread gothic theme. The gothic novel of the second half of the 18th century was very much concerned with parenthood, with the issues of succession and usurpation of the birthright, with heritage and extended, increasingly complex family ties. It depicted the dissolution of the nuclear family and the psychological instability generated by guilty and/or adoptive parents. As a natural *fin-de-siècle* continuation of this literary current, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is about the monster made by man, reflecting Shelley's own childbirth and parenting fears. It also introduces a new literary theme that is to be explored

throughout the 19th and 20th centuries – the creator is also a parent to be held responsible for his creation. The period also saw some pre-Freudian, post-gothic musings by E. A. Poe. In his *Ligeia* (1838), Poe reflects on the obsessive behaviour of a single father, linking eroticism and parenthood into a narrative of morbid incest.

The 18th and 19th centuries were concerned with establishing models for the roles of parents of both sexes, consigning the women to the domestic sphere and the men to the public. Such ideas of parenthood were vehicled by family narratives, autobiographies and instruction booklets but also by many novels. The mothers would provide cares to the younger children and girls, while fathers were considered responsible for the education of elder children and boys in general. Parenthood became at once a duty and an obligation. Some of the paintings and drawings of J. E. Millais depict the ideal family and present the image of successful parenthood (e.g. *The Young Mother*, 1856; *The Crawley Family*, 1860; *The Ruling Passion*, 1885). Much in the same fashion, the beginning of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) announces the typical family structure with Beth's famous « We've got Father and Mother, and each other ». Alcott's book is said to represent the female revolt against 19th century assumptions that a “female genius” cannot be a parent but it also explores the cult of femininity, of childbearing and parenting, roles to be contested by some feminists but advocated by others. In this respect, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) displays a challenging plot, based on an innovative theme. Beyond the most obvious problem of original sin, lies a discussion of the hardships of single parenthood. It also develops the stereotype of the “Madonna with Child”, raising parenthood to a higher level. *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) goes back to the theme of the heritage parents leave to their children, much in line with H. Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). However, Hawthorne is more concerned with hereditary transmission of sin rather than the practical problems of parenthood. Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) also goes back to an old theme, that of the abandoned child. Instead of focusing on the child itself, Hardy depicts the life of the parent, haunted by guilt and the painful souvenir of past parenthood. In an attempt to expiate the sin of abandonment, the main character

becomes mayor. The impulse to compensate the wrongdoing makes him the parent of an entire village. Here, we notice a change in perspectives – while the sentimental and gothic novel would focus on the life, adventures and growing up of the abandoned child, later 19th century authors chose a perspective which permitted them to explore the psychology of the abandoning parent. Another late 19th-century author who is frequently associated with the intricacies of the parental psyche is Henry James. His *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is a story told by a governess. It is about dead parents, neglected children, an absent uncle, and disturbed guardians. The psychological frustration accumulates and causes the death of a child, a death which can be taken literally or as a metaphor of the premature death of childhood and innocence.

The 20th century saw a number of literary developments and experiments. On the one hand, *The Lord of the Flies*, 1954 and *A Brave New World*, propose dystopian visions of parenthood. In the first, parental control is totally absent from an aggressive, deathly atmosphere. The second represents twisted political machinery because of which children send their parents to death. The third speculates about the implications of planned parenthood if carried too far. On the other hand, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) focuses on birth as a metaphor of writing and artistic creation. Atwood likens the conception of a story to the conception of a child, and the writing process to a painful delivery.

As we have seen, the image of the parent in literature is far from being immutable. The relationships and conflicts between parents and children have become recurrent themes in world literature. Some of them are not developed explicitly or intentionally but they are nevertheless present and through them, we can try and imagine what parenthood was like throughout past centuries. Through diverse forms of literature, society gradually came to conceptualise parenthood, often without making direct reference to the word itself. However, the ramifications of the theme are numerous and provide a rich background for innovative academic research.

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