Alternative Perceptions of Motherhood in Lawrence’s *Women in Love* and Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

| CANDACE LAND |

Throughout James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, published in 1916, Stephen Dedalus’ attitude toward motherhood transforms and he begins to approach the subject with increasing skepticism. The traditional views of motherhood as established by the church provide a basis for Stephen’s attitude as a child. However, Stephen grows suspicious of traditional motherhood as he comes of age. This suspicion is exacerbated by his break with the church and, on a lesser scale, his encounters with prostitutes. D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, published in 1920, also challenges the traditional views of motherhood through the character of Mrs. Crich, who contradicts the figure of the traditional Mother Mary. Additionally, Lawrence uses the character of Rupert Birkin to present motherhood as a way in which women bear power over men through creation and also to assert that women are inseparable from their identity as mothers. Although the views in these books differ greatly, Joyce and Lawrence are both pioneers of modern literature in that they both present alternate views of the figure of the mother and re-imagine motherhood in non-traditional ways.
As a child, Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* views motherhood in a traditional way. He sees his mother as a source of warmth and comfort, and the word mother carries positive connotations that are connected by Stephen’s senses and emotions. In the first chapter of the book, Stephen describes his mother as having a “nicer smell than his father” (3) and goes on to describe her feet encased in slippers as having “such a lovely warm smell” (6). This demonstrates that Stephen associates pleasant smells with motherhood, which is consistent with the traditional characteristics of a mother. He also links motherhood with the idea of home; when Stephen is not enjoying the boys’ school, he longs to “be at home and lay his head on his mother’s lap” (9), symbolizing the mother as a source of consolation and contentment. Similarly, when Stephen is not feeling well just before the holidays, he writes a letter to his mother asking her to get him and bring him home, and this action is followed by the thought that “he might die before his mother came” (22). This particular event emphasizes the bond between mother and son, as Stephen appeals only to his mother through writing and not his father, and also neglects to mention his father when he goes on to envision the horror of dying before his mother arrives.

In contradiction to the positive connotations linked with motherhood by a young Stephen Dedalus, Mrs. Crich in Lawrence’s *Women in Love* is depicted as a slovenly woman and is associated with negative sensual connotations. Mrs. Crich is described as a “queer unkempt figure … [whose] face was pale, yellowish, with a clear, transparent skin” (Lawrence 27) and she is described as untidy, with a neck and ears that are “not quite clean” (38). The portrayal of a mother as unclean explicitly clashes with the traditional idea that mothers are clean and tidy which is displayed through Stephen Dedalus’ description of his mother as having a pleasant smell.

In addition to her outward appearance, Mrs. Crich also does not possess the qualities associated with the traditional personality of a mother. While Stephen Dedalus depicts his mother as a nurturing source of comfort, Mrs. Crich is described as having a “predative” (27) look, directly opposing the traditional demeanor of a mother described by Stephen Dedalus. She is a hostile woman who seems indifferent to human life, and this indifference extends to her children. When her daughter Diana asks if she may have wine, Mrs. Crich “automatically” replies in the affirmative because she is “perfectly indifferent to
the question” (42). This exposes her lack of diligent care toward her children, as she does not put any effort into mothering them. In addition, Mrs. Crich does not acknowledge a reason why she should recognize her sons-in-law as part of her family. She does not wish to have anything to do with them and expresses to Birkin that she wishes to say to them, “I am not your mother, in any sense” (39). Furthermore, Mrs. Crich reveals that she is skeptical as to whether there is a distinct special bond which connects a mother to her children, mentioning to Birkin, “I have had children of my own. I suppose I know them from another woman's children” (39). By implying that the only difference between her children and other children is the fact that they physically came from her womb, she dismisses the traditional idea that children are all individually special in the eyes of a mother. These characteristics portray Mrs. Crich as a non-traditional mother figure.

The traditional motherly characteristics which Mrs. Crich contradicts originate in the ideals presented by the church to Stephen Dedalus. The church praises Mary as the ultimate figure of motherhood: she stands as a symbol for motherhood as pure, nurturing, and forgiving. When Stephen confesses his sins after using prostitutes, he is told to pray to Mary to help him (156), reinforcing the idea of Mary as an overarching mother figure who watches over and guides all the children of God. The church also emphasizes the innate bond between mother and child: the preacher in chapter three compares a mother being parted from her child to the anguish one feels when one is spurned from God (109). This implies that although the relationship between mother and child is of less magnitude, it nevertheless parallels the relationship between God and his followers. In these ways, the church reinforces the traditional views of motherhood—views that Stephen begins to reject as he loses faith in the church.

As Stephen Dedalus comes of age and begins to view the church in a different light, his attitude toward motherhood is also altered. Stephen’s suspicion of the church heightens his skepticism toward motherhood. He claims that Jesus treated Mary with “scant courtesy in public” (263), suggesting that Mary was not an important figure to Jesus, and that they did not have a traditional bond as mother and son. Stephen further goes on to say that “[Jesus] is more like a son of God than a son of Mary” (264), discrediting Mary as a mother. When Stephen denounces Mary as an insignificant figure, he is
simultaneously denouncing both the church and the figure of the mother as a whole, as Mary symbolizes all motherhood and is also a symbol of holiness. This renunciation demonstrates that Stephen’s skepticism towards the church parallels his skepticism towards motherhood.

Stephen Dedalus’ detachment from the mother figure is further demonstrated by his failure to acknowledge the sheer possibility of a natural connection between mother and child. In a conversation Stephen has with his friend Cranly towards the end of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Cranly asks Stephen if he loves his mother. In response, Stephen shakes his head and replies: “I don’t know what your words mean” (261). This suggests that Stephen feels so disconnected from the traditional mother-and-child bond that he cannot seem to fathom the idea of natural love for his mother. He then approaches the situation in a practical way rather than an emotional way, reasoning that if he could, he would save his mother from suffering more because it would “cost [him] very little” (262). His use of the word “cost” emphasizes his pragmatic stance toward the relationship between mother and son and reveals his lack of emotional connection to his mother. Stephen’s failure to recognize a natural link between mother and son demonstrates the lack of significance he ascribes to motherhood. This perspective greatly contrasts with the emphasis he placed on the figure of the mother as a child.

Birkin claims that the gift of life given by women puts man in debt forever, thereby allowing women to have a great power over men

While Stephen Dedalus presents motherhood as insignificant, Birkin in Lawrence’s *Women in Love* argues that motherhood is significant yet negative and presents a revision of the traditional biblical creation story to prove his point. The traditional creation story in the Bible describes woman as being created from Adam’s rib—however, Birkin reverses this idea, claiming that man is created by woman because women bear men in their womb. This idea attributes the power of creation to motherhood, and therefore seems to align with traditional attitudes of the church which praise Mary as the mother of all mankind. However, unlike
the church, Birkin claims that the gift of life given by women puts man in debt forever, thereby allowing women to have a great power over men. Birkin resents this power and describes it as an intolerable feeling of constant possession at the hands of woman. He states that “always a man must be considered the broken off fragment of a woman” (233). The image of man being a “broken off fragment of a woman” emphasizes and reverses the creation story, presenting Adam as a fragment of Eve rather than Eve being created from a fragment—the rib—of Adam. Although Birkin presents motherhood as significant, his resentment of the power gained by women through motherhood implies that motherhood is not to be valued by men. Therefore, despite their different attitudes regarding the significance of motherhood, both Birkin and Stephen Dedalus view motherhood in a negative light.

Mrs. Crich, regardless of her status as a non-traditional mother, exemplifies Birkin’s idea that women possess power over man through creation. Although Mrs. Crich does not validate the idea that mother and child have a special connection, she reserves the right to assert the power of life and death over her biological children. When her husband dies, she declares, “If I thought that the children I bore would lie looking like that in death, I’d strangle them when they were infants” (382), suggesting that it is her right to end her children’s lives because she gave birth to them and therefore may revoke the gift of life at any time. The children’s lives are not their own, but rather Mrs. Crich’s because she gave them life; as Birkin states, “Man was hers because she had borne him” (232). In this way, Mrs. Crich’s attitude toward her children’s lives illustrates Birkin’s idea of motherhood as a powerful tool over creation, and over men.

Rather than linking motherhood with creation as Birkin does, and as Mrs. Crich’s attitude implies, Stephen Dedalus instead begins to associate motherhood with sex because his experiences with prostitutes modify his attitude toward women. While discussing motherhood with his friend Cranly toward the end of the book, it is apparent that Stephen links all women, including mothers, to the idea of sex when he mentions that “Pascal … would not suffer his mother to kiss him as he feared the contact of her sex” (263). Imposing sexuality on the figure of the mother, even through the words of someone else, suggests that Stephen’s encounters with prostitutes have caused him to indiscriminately associate women with sex. This linking of the mother figure with sex dismantles the
traditional concept of the mother figure as sexually pure like the Virgin Mary. In addition, the mental tie between prostitutes and sex causes Stephen to view sex as a means of pleasure rather than procreation, further rendering the figure of the mother impure. Stephen combines the figure of the mother and the prostitute through their common property of belonging to the female sex, thus coming to link both prostitutes and mothers with pleasure-related sex. Stephen’s altered view devalues motherhood by suggesting that mothers are impure, which is a radical change in perspective considering his original view of motherhood as a source of comfort and nurturing.

Birkin in Lawrence’s Women in Love is, like Stephen, unable to separate the idea of women in general from the figure of the mother, which is evident given his idea that all women possess power over men through creation. However, contrary to Stephen, Birkin illustrates the synonymy of these ideas in relation to the Mother Mary by portraying women solely as symbols of creation. Birkin applies the label of Mother to all women equally, declaring that “everything must be referred back to her, to Woman, the Great Mother of everything, of out whom proceeded everything and to whom everything must finally be rendered up” (232). While this assertion presents motherhood as significant, it simultaneously undermines women by insinuating that they are not individuals but instead are a collectivity which symbolizes motherhood. Though Birkin’s idea that women are the “Great Mother of everything” at first glance seems to empower women, he actually reduces women by refusing to recognize women as individual beings separate from their identity as mothers. Birkin and Stephen Dedalus both fail to see women as individuals and instead generalize women, consequently reducing the significance of motherhood because of their insistence on the synonymy of the woman and the mother.

Therefore, by generalizing women as members of collective motherhood, questioning the existence of a natural bond between mother and child, and discrediting the church’s traditional views of motherhood as portrayed by the Virgin Mary, both Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Lawrence’s Women in Love demonstrate a subversion of motherhood and the figure of the mother. In Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Stephen Dedalus accepts the traditional view of motherhood as a child, but later challenges the figure of the mother and the significance of motherhood in the aftermath of his experiences
with prostitutes and his loss of faith in the church. By contrast, in *Women in Love*, Mrs. Crich is presented as a negation of a traditional motherhood and Birkin’s ideas are used to reverse the traditional creation story, bestowing a resentful significance upon motherhood. In these ways, both Joyce and Lawrence challenge the traditional perception of motherhood and alternatively present subversions of traditional ideals in its place.

**WORKS CITED**
