Her Mother's Daughter Short Guide

Her Mother's Daughter by Marilyn French

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Characters

The significant characters in Her Mother's Daughter are the women.

Frances, the Polish-born grandmother, shapes her daughter Belle's life in many important ways, as reflected in Belle's life-long lament, "My mother never combed my hair." This simple statement encompasses all the unmet needs a little girl felt but could not express to an overworked mother.

Belle is easily the most compelling figure in the story. Sometimes bright and chirpy, sometimes picky and critical to the point of unreason, she haunts her daughter Anastasia's inner life even when Anastasia is in her fifties.

The reader hears what Anastasia hears and what she thinks, but the miasma of Belle's emotional reactions hangs over all her daughter's decisions. This centrality of the narrator's mother is no accident. It brings the braided nature of the "mother-knot" into sharp focus.

Anastasia or "Stacey" is the "modern" woman who, at some cost, wins the opportunity for an independent life and satisfying work. She "serves a sentence" as a young wife depressed by "total immersion in babies" and suburban isolation from everyone she knows. In the 1960s and 1970s, life as a single mother means more autonomy and a chance to launch her own career.

But along with Anastasia's achievements as a photographer come some ugly lessons about the way the world works, which, as French sees it is essentially for the benefit of self-aggrandizing men.

Other notable female characters are Anastasia's sister, Joy, her daughters, Arden and Franny, and her sometimes landlady and baby sitter, Pani, whose Polish customs remind Anastasia of her own roots. As their lives and decisions interact, the various women illustrate both the connectedness of womankind and the various obstacles that confront all women.

Male characters are secondary in this novel. Although various men play large parts in the women's lives, they are used more as personifications of patriarchy than as fully drawn characters. A few males get better treatment: Grant Michaels, a reporter who is the narrator's friend and bedmate during some of her work-related travels; and Toni, her second husband who first appears in her life as a handsome, innocent young man. But professional success turns Toni back to the stereotypical male pattern after a few years, and Anastasia's times with Grant are scarcely plentiful—or prosaic—enough for his bad traits to show.

Most puzzling is the portrayal of Anastasia's father, Ed, a male character who is not domineering, brutal, or contemptuous. In fact his patience in living with a "difficult" wife

is admirable, but he too is seen by the narrator as an oppressive representative of the patriarchy.

It is interesting that French's nonfiction book, Beyond Power (1986), attributes the injustice of present gender relationships to power imbalance, not to inborn male aggression or wickedness. Very little of her theory is visible in the present novel. The men are treated as almost unrelenting oppressors, without much recognition that men can also be victims of the system.

Social Concerns/Themes

In Her Mother's Daughter Marilyn French reveals the chain of destiny forged by the novel's mother-daughter relationship—links that endure and constrain through the several generations of women portrayed in the narrative. French's primary thematic focus is on how particular women's experiences and emotional needs affect their daughters and granddaughters, rather than on the more diffuse concept of motherhood as the primal human bond.

The author's stunning novel, The Women's Room (1977), immediately established her bona fides in the women's movement. Nevertheless, the narrator's reflections in Her Mother's Daughter on how her mother's deprivations shaped her own life draw more on the work of Sigmund Freud and Benjamin Spock than on feminist analysis. This more broadly psychological approach no doubt accounts for the book's popularity. Its panoramic and detailed accumulation of events produces repeated "shocks of recognition" for almost all female readers. Although specific events may vary, beneath them lie the universal experiences of a daughter craving her mother's love and approval, and a mother's anguish over her inability to give enough to her daughters.

The novel also examines the claims and rewards of the major preoccupations of women's lives: children, men, and work. In this reading, men come out worst of the three: their demands are presented as enormous, and the rewards they offer are virtually limited to grudging financial support and biological fatherhood. French shows the poignant ambiguities of work and motherhood, however. A career can offer self-fulfillment, and the means for independent and moral action; yet many jobs are undiluted drudgery, like the box- and hat-making that occupies so many of the narrator's mother's — Belle's — hours. Other jobs turn the individual from a thinking, feeling being into a glad-handing automaton, as happens when Brad, the narrator's first husband, "goes into" real estate.

The ties of motherhood are shown as all encompassing; they profoundly shape and support each woman's being. Yet along with sustenance they bring inevitable hurt. Neither the suffering nor the sustenance flows in only one direction; they reverberate up and down the generational chain, and extend to sisters and female friends as well. French thus thoughtfully bridges the gap between the "motherhood is sacred" and the career-oriented wings of modern feminism, which have diverged with the movement's maturity.

A subsidiary theme is that of immigrant families making a place for themselves in mainstream America. The narrator's grandmother, Frances, arrived at Ellis Island from Poland when she was thirteen, "not a peasant" as her descendants are always quick to tell themselves, but nevertheless a terrified and naive young woman. Frances's hard life is essentially lived "between two cultures," but her daughter Belle acculturates rapidly. She goes from sweatshop "girl" to art school student and later from a Depression Era housewife in a cramped apartment to comfortable leisure in retirement. In her upward passage Belle mirrors the experience of a host of second-generation Americans in the

mid-century economy. Belle's social and financial mobility during her lifetime are substantial, and unlikely to be matched by either her daughters or her granddaughters.

By many standards this dissatisfied woman got somewhat better than she deserved out of life. French's message here is more elusive than on the gender-linked themes. She leaves it to the reader to decide whether Belle's life course is a critique of materialism, of the "lucky" generation who fell into prosperity immediately after World War II, or simply a device to emphasize Belle's inner deprivations by contrasting them with her external material successes.

Techniques

Her Mother's Daughter is consistent with feminist literary prescriptions in disdaining a tightly plotted structure which builds to a narrative climax.

Instead it uses a more organic pattern which follows the ebb and flow of events in the main characters' lives.

A more distinctive device is the use of a dual sequence to organize the narrative. Episodes in Belle's life alternate with events experienced by her daughter Anastasia at a corresponding stage of her life. Anastasia tells her own story in the first-person, while Belle's story is told from the more distant third-person point of view. This dual structure promotes the comparison of Anastasia's and her mother's respective childhood experiences.

Courtships, young-married financial problems, and other common experiences of life are similarly treated. This device accentuates the universals of female experience without reducing them to a repetitious biological determinism. French also uses a minor circular motif, with certain unique events recurring in every generation. For example, each generation of the family's children are given roles in school plays, and they are always cast as teeth.

The mother-daughter relationship has rarely served as a major theme in literature for male or female writers.

The silence of women writers is baffling. Perhaps the bond's very centrality in women's psyches makes it difficult to write about comfortably, or perhaps women simply perceived that it was not an acceptable topic for the literary establishment.

Key Questions

As in all of French's novels, the focus in Her Mother's Daughter is almost en tirely on women characters and women's lives. Unlike some of them, it does not necessarily demand to be read as a feminist tract. In fact, so much of its feminist message comes in Stacey's (the narrator's) voice, that one could question whether her's is the only explanation the reader should believe.

One provocative question the novel suggests is to what extent daughters repeat their mother's lives, and what happens when they determine not to.

"Family saga" novels with several generations of strong women characters might be brought into this discussion for a view from another angle.

How immigrant families acculturate and build a life in a new country is another possible topic. Novels such as Amy Tan's have contemporary parallels to Frances's and Belle's experiences earlier in the century.

1. Stacey's mother Belle found more prosperity and security than her mother Frances, an immigrant from Poland, ever knew. She also had more than her daughter Stacey or her granddaughters are likely to attain. Is this an experience common to Belle's generation? If so, what are some likely reasons?

2. Despite her good fortune, Belle was chronically dissatisfied. Was this just due to her personality, or were there reasons for it in her life's situation?

3. Toni, who hates his job and wants to concentrate on his writing, offers to care for his grandmother Pane after her stroke. Otherwise she would have to go to a nursing home. In exchange, Toni asked for "a stipulated monthly payment." If he had been her granddaughter, do you think he would have been so likely to offer? With or without the money?

4. The novel is organized around parallel stages and crises in its women characters' lives. How does this differ from the usual structures of popular and of serious fiction? Do you find it more realistic?

5. Do the universals or near-universals of female experience tie women more closely than men to family history and relationships, as this structure seems to imply?

6. Children, men, and work are shown as the three major preoccupations of women's lives. Does this grouping leave out other, equally important concerns? Does it leave out some women?

7. During the narrator's marriage, she found that other unhappy wives blamed their problems on having married the wrong man. Stacey, on the other hand, decided she did not want to be married at all. Is this because she saw life more clearly, as the novel seems to suggest?

8. Although Stacey's father Ed has none of the more obnoxious traits she associates with patriarchal privilege, she feels he is equally guilty because he has benefited from it. Is this a fair assumption?

9. Does the author prove her case that each woman's life was significantly diminished by living in a patriarchal society?

Literary Precedents

There are few other novels with which Her Mother's Daughter can be compared. Gail Godwin's A Mother and Two Daughters (1982) deals with this theme, although in Godwin's novel the effects of the mother-daughter tie are more psychologically diffuse. Regardless of any defects in her novel, French deserves credit for writing honestly about an important and vulnerable part of women's identity.

More strained comparisons might be made with the "big" multigenerational sagas, and with novels of father-son relationships. In such comparisons, details of daily domestic life loom larger in Her Mother's Daughter. Also, the major conflicts in French's novel are with social reality, rather than between parent and offspring which characterize so many father-son novels.

Related Titles

French's announced intention was to go on to new themes after the success of The Women's Room. Although the focus of the present work is different, the parallels in story structure with French's first novel are noteworthy.

In both novels a first-person narrator first marries and has children with a man slated for upper-middle-class professional success. When the marriages become intolerable, the women receive no social support for their decision to divorce, since on the surface their husbands gave them "everything a woman could want." Both Mira and Anastasia then discover their own professional interests. During this stage each woman also becomes involved with a younger, less rigidly macho man. For each woman these relationships are more satisfying than their previous marriages. But these liaisons also ultimately break up, because the siren-song of masculine privilege is too strong for even "sensitive" men to resist.

Her Mother's Daughter lacks the sense of a wider community of women that was so powerful in The Women's Room.

However, to a certain extent the "conspiracy of women" within families, which extends even to Joy's seemingly remote mother-in-law, takes its place.

Lastly, like The Women's Room, the book is framed with images of a fiftyish woman's aloneness. In this novel's opening and closing pages, however, Anastasia's solitary life is seen against the situation of her mother, who is still married as an old woman. While Belle is pampered in many ways and has never had to live alone, it is clear that she is not a happy person. Thus French seems to say that neither marriage nor independence is a satisfactory lifecourse for a woman in our present society.

The point is magnified by the paths which lead to the two women (Mira and Anastasia) being alone. In The Women's Room, Mira ends up alone because she refuses to modify her newfound career interests and start over in raising a family in accordance with her male lover's plans. However, the book does hold out the possibility that in a society of women things would be different. In Her Mother's Daughter, Anastasia has long since decided against another marriage. She becomes friend and lover to her new colleague, Clara. Eventually she also rejects Clara's wish that they share a life. Too many parts of herself would have to be given up for Anastasia to sustain any close and equal relationship. The novel's ending thus suggests that until society is totally transformed, no woman can live both authentically and in a satisfying relationship. It is a powerful and disturbing conclusion.

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