

# Mother and Child Short Guide

## Mother and Child by Joan D. Vinge

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# Characters

Etaa is the pivotal character in the story. Beloved by both Hywel, the Kotaane smith, and Meron, the Neaane king, she represents the possibility of communication between the two factions. Etaa can see and hear clearly, a rare combination among the plague damaged populace. When Etaa is kidnapped by Meron, Hywel becomes a ferocious warleader in his efforts to make the Neaane return her. Etaa, meanwhile, learns about the Neaane religion and their way of life. She discovers that the "gods" are not what they appear to be and rejects both the Neaane religion and their king. The king, however, believes he has impregnated her and proclaims her son as his heir. Meron also gains an understanding of the Kotaane that strengthens his attachment to Etaa in spite of her refusal to return his love. Ultimately, Tam, one of the "gods," acting on orders from his superiors, removes Etaa and her child to a satellite to keep them out of danger. Moved by Etaa's obvious intelligence and her devotion to her child, Tarn undertakes to teach her how to talk. Eventually, acting against orders, Tam takes Etaa back and engineers the acceptance of her son by both factions: The Kotaane accept him because he is Etaa's son, the Neaane because they believe he is Meron's son. Peace is restored and the stage is set for the reunion of the factions into one society. All four of the main characters are strong-minded and strong-willed, but it is Etaa who brings out the strength of the males. Etaa is groomed from birth to be a high priestess. She knows what she wants and pursues it. She chooses Hywel as her mate, not the reverse. Hywel's strength does not appear until he loses Etaa and becomes an unrelenting warrior in his efforts to rescue her. Meron has been a restless ruler chafing under the restrictions of his clergy, but he does not truly rebel until he has taken Etaa as his concubine. Then he makes a break with his bishop when the bishop demands that she be mutilated in accordance with the religious rules. Meron sticks to his new-found tenets even though they cost him his life. Tam, under Etaa's spell, realizes the cost of his race's interference in human affairs and attempts to undo past wrongs by helping Etaa unite the Kotaane and Neaane. This also results in the reunion of Hywel and Etaa, something that Tam has come to desire.



## Social Concerns

The main characters in *Mother and Child*, Etaa, Hywel, King Meron, and Tam (the God), inhabit a world settled by technologically advanced humans and later devastated by a plague that wiped out civilization and caused numerous physical defects among humans born post-plague. It is hinted, but never outrightly stated, that the plague was genetically engineered and accidentally set loose. This raises a question familiar to Vinge's fans: What limits should be placed on technology?

The devastation of the plague ruins the civilization that spawned it, sending it back to a more primitive level and dividing it into two factions: the Kotaane and the Neaane. These factions represent extreme reactions to the results of the plague. The Kotaane have reverted to a low-tech agrarian lifestyle, worshipping a Mother goddess, and trying desperately to recover from the effects of the plague which has caused widespread deafness, varying degrees of blindness, and infertility. As a result, people with full use of sight or hearing (or both) are honored among the Kotaane and encouraged to mate with one another. Couples who are fertile are encouraged to bear children — clearly the Kotaane recognize the benefits of selective breeding without understanding genetics. The Neaane have clung to the higher-tech cities and a priest-dominated religion that teaches that physical defects are "good" and full sight and hearing are "evil." As a result, the Neaane are breeding selectively to enhance blindness, deafness, and infertility. Furthermore, at the behest of the priests, hearing people have their eardrums destroyed. The Neaane are helped by "gods" who give them some forms of technology. Clearly, the two factions represent extreme reactions to the misuse of technology. The Kotaane are those people who would reject all technology because it is not "natural," losing all the benefits as well. The Neaane represent those who feel that acceptance of technology requires acceptance of its misuse.

The "gods" present yet another social concern. These silicon-based life forms are social engineers assigned by their society to solve the "human problem." They are experimenting with ways to keep down human aggression so they can share worlds with human societies. To do this, they encourage the Kotaane and Neaane misunderstandings and even support the vicious Neaane priests. Their interests lie in keeping humans from regaining the technical capacity which might make them a threat to the silicon-based civilization. Certainly a parallel can be drawn to current practices where various factions in exploitable countries are encouraged in their hostilities by technologically more advanced countries. The result is easier manipulation of resources by the controlling countries.

The regressive and repressive religion is a familiar fixture in Vinge's fiction. Clearly, the Neaane priests are malevolent beings intent on cementing their power, totally unconcerned with the well-being of their flock. Just as clearly, they represent the dangers of a state religion, as seen in today's world, and constitute an argument for continued separation of church and state.

# Techniques

The story of Etaa is told by three first-person narrators. The first third of the story is told by Hywel, Etaa's chosen mate. The second third is narrated by Meron, king of the Neaane. Tarn, the "god," tells the last third. This first person technique gives the story immediacy and allows the reader to see Etaa from three different perspectives. The narrator's attitude toward Etaa also gives the reader insight into his character. Since first person narratives are subjective, the reader must also decide how to interpret each narrator's story in order to arrive at his own conclusions about Etaa. Furthermore, each narrator makes clear in his statements exactly what misconceptions each side has about the other, and the reader sees a gradual change in outlook as love for Etaa causes each narrator to adapt his viewpoints.

# Themes

The most obvious theme in *Mother and Child* is the dangers of unlimited technology. The plague which devastated the human civilization is almost certainly genetically engineered. The resulting decline in civilization and in technological understanding opens the door to the silicon-based "gods" and another theme in the book. The "gods" are outsiders manipulating the human societies for their own selfish purposes.

The parallel between the "gods" and the imperialistic governments of the past and present is unmistakable. The moral and ethical questions are also analogous — does a more advanced society have the right to manipulate a less advanced society for its own ends?

The most overarching theme in *Mother and Child* is the importance of communication. In a world where most of the inhabitants are deaf, communication is a problem. That most of this world is also illiterate compounds the problem.

Communication can take place only face to face where either sign language or lip reading is possible. Thus each member of society is isolated by disability. Even Etaa, and those few others who have full use of their faculties, are limited to signing and lip reading because their society has forgotten how to talk. This isolation and lack of communication is encouraged by the "gods" as a way of manipulating both factions and keeping the humans from uniting. Not until Tam, a renegade god, teaches Etaa to speak is the cycle broken. Once Etaa realizes the incredible power of this form of communication, she is able to see a future where the Neaane and Kotaane are united as one people. This will mean the eventual end of the "gods'" control and a brighter future for the planet under the rule of Etaa's son who also can speak, hear, and talk.

# Key Questions

Clearly, Vinge has presented the reader with a set of social concerns.

The most obvious is that technology unchecked by ethics can have serious if not fatal consequences. She also presents the reader with two societies created from a single society by a high tech disaster. One society goes "all natural" rejecting both the benefits and the evils of technology. The other society believes it must accept the evils of technology in order to reap its benefits.

Each side feels that it is right and despises the other, creating an exploitable gap. This gap is encouraged by a silicon-based alien society that uses the lack of understanding and communication to keep the humans harmless, at least to silicon-based aliens!

1. How do you feel about Tarn's society's social engineering?
2. Do you see any parallels between twentieth century imperialism and the actions of Tam's society?
3. What do you consider the advantages and disadvantages of a nature based lifestyle as practiced by the Kotaane?
4. What do you consider the advantages and disadvantages of the technology-religion based lifestyle as practiced by the Neaane?
5. What role do you think physical disability plays in the lack of communication?
6. How do you think increased communication will affect the Neaone and Kotaane world view?

## Literary Precedents

Love triangles abound in literature, so the Etaa, Hywel, Meron triangle is not in itself remarkable. The emotional attachment between the alien Tarn and human Etaa, is not remarkable in science fiction; just consider E.T., Enemy Mine, and Doc Smith's Lensman and Wyrzel. The ploy of the three narrators, each with a different viewpoint, has been done before, too. Ultimately, what makes this story work better than the sum of its plot is the reader's sympathy for Etaa evoked by her isolation from all she has held familiar and beloved. The reader can appreciate her remarkable strength of character in remaining herself under pressure to change. Etaa's love for her child, which ultimately means relinquishing him to the care of others in order to provide him with a future, is sure to arouse sympathy in the most hard-hearted.





# Copyright Information

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