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*Constance Beresford-Howe's*  
*Interrogation*  
*of*  
*Integrative Feminism*

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M.A. Thesis  
Submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts  
Department of English

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## *Abstract*

This thesis analyzes Constance Beresford-Howe's novels in terms of their place in the contemporary feminist debate over women's traditional roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives. Her treatment of these roles supports Andrea O'Reilly's assertion that Beresford-Howe espouses what Angela Miles has called "integrative feminism", "a feminism which affirms and celebrates women's specificity and asks not for the eradication of women's traditional roles and values but for the recognition of their importance" (O'Reilly 69). Chapter One deals with a range of feminist literary criticism and particularly with the notion of "integrative feminism" and its applicability to the novels of Beresford-Howe, as well as entertaining complementary and divergent readings of this theory offered by such critics as Germaine Greer and Judith Stacey. Chapter Two considers the portrayal of sisters, daughters, and other female "helpers" in such novels as Of this Day's Journey (1947), The Invisible Gate (1949), My Lady Greensleeves (1955), A Population of One (1977), and Prospero's Daughter (1988). Chapter Three examines the portrayal of the institutionalized roles of mother and wife in such novels as The Unreasoning Heart (1946), My Lady Greensleeves (1955), The Book of Eve (1973), and Night Studies (1985). Chapter Four extends the discussion of mothers and wives, with an emphasis on the protagonist's successful redefinition of those roles in The Marriage Bed (1981) and A Serious Widow (1991).

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## *Preface*

When I first discovered Constance Beresford-Howe's The Book of Eve on a reading list for a "Women in Literature" course, I was impressed predominantly by the honesty, humour, and openness with which Beresford-Howe explores the experience of her protagonist, Eva Carroll. I was also left with the feeling that this novel did not express all of its author's thoughts on women's roles or her insights about women's feelings as they perform the work of mothers, wives, and caregivers. Although The Book of Eve is a complete work of fiction, it also invites further consideration of women's reactions to their traditional roles. Subsequent reading of Beresford-Howe's nine other novels confirmed my suspicion that there was more to investigate. And Beresford-Howe has not disappointed in the honesty and complexity (masquerading as simplicity and humour) with which she treats the subject of women's experience.

After discovering a brief critical article by Andrea O'Reilly that dealt with "The Voices of Eve" trilogy (The Book of Eve, A Population of One, and The Marriage Bed), I articulated my understanding of the connection between Beresford-Howe's portrayal of women in their traditional roles and Angela Miles' theory of integrative feminism.<sup>1</sup> O'Reilly's four-page article is still one of the few critical pieces to deal with Beresford-Howe's writing.<sup>2</sup> That article and numerous unfavourable reviews of The Marriage Bed further convinced me that critics were

overlooking the novel's complexities, constituting a state of neglect which encouraged me to uncover and name these complexities.<sup>3</sup> This exercise eventually involved me in articulating my thesis: namely, that Beresford-Howe envisions women's empowerment in their traditional roles occurring only if they can redefine those roles to accentuate their own strengths and needs to care for, nurture, and protect others, while solidifying their own identities.

Consequently, this study was written partly because so little critical attention had been given to the writings of Constance Beresford-Howe, and partly in response to the little serious criticism her novels have received. I particularly wish to take issue with Andrea O'Reilly's assertion (echoed by other critics, mostly in book reviews), that Beresford-Howe's writing is reactionary and even anti-feminist (O'Reilly 72). It is simply false to assert that Beresford-Howe's vision is conservative and anti-feminist. She is conservative only in that her fiction presents the nuclear family as it is constructed and supported in patriarchal society. But that is not to say that Beresford-Howe is complacent about the status quo or the roles of women within this familial arrangement. To depict, as Beresford-Howe does, relationships within the nuclear family is not naively to celebrate those relations; in fact, she is dedicated to exposing their shortcomings--and specifically the shortcomings for women: women's powerlessness in relation to men, the impossibly high standards and expectations imposed upon women who are having and

raising children, women's loss of control over their own bodies, and other such concerns of contemporary feminists. Beresford-Howe is acutely aware of the struggles involved for women who must live within the traditional patriarchal structures. At the same time, her fiction offers hope to women who find themselves in or attracted to these traditional roles by encouraging them to question these roles, to recognize when the roles are being delimited by men to meet only men's needs, to redefine these roles so that women can also meet their own needs, and to celebrate this redefinition--and the redefined roles themselves--as empowering to women.

My reading of these ten novels betrays a principally sociological concern with women's place, and a particularly feminist concern with the politics of women's empowerment in patriarchal society. Feminist theory is necessarily and inarguably related to women's social and political concerns. As a system of thought, feminism insists on the connection between the personal and the political, and rejects the distinction between theory and practice, culture and nature, intellect and emotion. As a feminist, I reject this distinction as it applies to literary studies; for me, literature and society are intimately related and reflective of one another, particularly so in the writing of women who also reject that art and life are separate. As a result, in my examination of Beresford-Howe's writing, I am chiefly interested in the sociological and political implications of the redefinition of women's traditional roles. Many of the

feminist critics whose theories and experience I cite to elucidate my thesis also believe in the interrelationship of literature and society, especially as art illuminates the institutions of patriarchal society that suppress women's power and limit women's freedom.

One distinction that patriarchy has blurred for its own benefit, and one which is especially relevant to the present study, is the distinction between women's experience and women's institutionalized roles. Many feminists have written about the institutionalization of women's roles: Adrienne Rich focusses on the institution of motherhood; Jane Lazarre ponders the restraints of the "motherhood mystique";<sup>4</sup> Vivien Nice and Paula Caplan highlight the institutionalized relationship between mothers and daughters; Amy Rossiter criticizes the institutionalization of women's traditional caregiving roles--mother, wife, sister, aunt, daughter. Beresford-Howe's novels prove particularly useful in an examination of institutionalized roles because, individually, they are fictionalized accounts of one woman's experience, but as a whole they can be seen to reflect society's institutionalizing of women's roles. In fact, they reflect precisely this distinction between experience and institution.

Thus Beresford-Howe's approach to fiction proves amenable to my sociological interest because her novels represent an actual, realistic fictionalizing of women's feelings and experiences. While her story-making is the best way to express one woman's

experience, it also highlights the destructive gap between women's experience and institutionalized roles that dictate what women's experience should be. Only the stories of individual women can draw attention to--and suggest ways of repairing--this split.

Notes to Preface

- 1 Chapter One will elucidate Angela Miles' theory of integrative feminism in detail. See also Angela Miles, "The Integrative Feminine Principle in North American Feminism: Value Basis for a New Feminism," Women's Studies International Quarterly IV, No 4 (1981): 481-495.
- 2 Andrea O'Reilly, "Feminizing Feminism: Constance Beresford-Howe and the Quest for Female Freedom," Canadian Woman Studies 8, No 3 (Fall 1987): 69-72.
- 3 For some unfavourable reviews of The Marriage Bed, see Paul Stuewe's review in Quill and Quire 47, No 9 (1981): 64; Anthony Brennan's review in The Fiddlehead No 133 (July 1982): 84-85; and Judith Timson, "Banal Story of a Stay-at-home Mother," Chatelaine 54 (Dec. 1981): 6. Even approving reviews, such as Dennis Duffy's in Queen's Quarterly 90 (spring 1983): 241-243, adopt a condescending tone towards the novel.
- 4 In The Mother Knot, Jane Lazarre uses this term, the "motherhood mystique", to describe "that impossible set of standards which oppresses us all" (ix).

## *Chapter One*

### *A Careful Navigator: An Introduction to Constance Beresford-Howe and Integrative Feminism*

Born in the 1920s and raised by an unliberated mother, Constance Beresford-Howe internalised certain attitudes about woman's place. Such circumstances no doubt contributed towards making the cumulative effect of reading her novels--the first written in 1946, the latest in 1991--one of witnessing the emergence of a feminist. This line of development was one taken by many other women writers of Beresford-Howe's time, those whose writing spanned a period beginning well before the Women's Movement of the 1960s and continuing into it. These women have struggled in their writing to reconcile pre-feminist, deeply engrained ideas about women and their duties and traditional functions--ideas garnered from the society in which they grew up and embodied in their own mothers--with the increasingly complex and contradictory notions set forth by feminists of all persuasions, colours, and classes.<sup>1</sup> Reading Constance Beresford-Howe leaves us, then, with the feeling of watching a woman struggling with the numerous views of feminism itself, and the values inherited from a pre-feminist mother and a patriarchal educational system.

Armed with a Ph.D. in Victorian literature from Brown University, educated and inculcated in the male mainstream literary tradition, Beresford-Howe was caught up in the growing awareness of such phenomena as forgotten women writers, Elaine Showalter's concept of "women's difference",<sup>2</sup> and celebrated male writers whose works present negative images of women. She began writing as a young student in the 1940s, and then, in a move typical of women of her generation, abandoned writing to become a mother and caregiver for twenty years. She returned to writing in the early 1970s, a changed woman in many respects, not least of which was the raised consciousness resulting from the advent of the Women's Movement in the 1960s. Given Beresford-Howe's upbringing and education, it is hardly surprising that she responded to such latent literary misogyny and the rebirth of feminism with the ambivalence and complex contradictions of her own fiction. Her early and later writing clash in tone and thematic concern, with the later novels consistently reflecting the indecisions and divisions between women's freedom on the one hand and women's traditional (and necessary, often desirable) roles on the other. The contradictions inherent in occupying this medial position appear everywhere in Beresford-Howe's novels.

Canadian critics and scholars demonstrate ambivalent responses to Beresford-Howe's fiction. Until now her work has scarcely been considered worthy of the attention of scholars and academic critics.<sup>3</sup> In fact, contemporary women's fiction as a

whole has not received the attention it deserves from the academic community. Paulina Palmer remarks:

The majority of academics are male - and male critics, whether expressing conservative or radical sympathies, are unlikely to show much interest in the fictional representation of [women's] themes. Women academics (very much in the minority) are also unlikely to concern themselves with them. Academic feminism...tends to privilege psychoanalytic and socialist feminist perspectives, while ignoring or disparaging theories and issues of a radical feminist kind. (4)

Furthermore, the recent trend in academic circles is to privilege texts that contain such post-modern elements as discontinuous narratives, self-reflexive narrators, and other anti-realist devices, and to discredit works written in the now unpopular realistic mode (as are the novels of Beresford-Howe). Because "literary criticism continues to be dominated by academia" (Palmer 4), which has not focused its attention on contemporary women's writing, most criticism of this writing has come from a more general readership untrained in literary criticism.<sup>4</sup> This practice has served to entrench the original disdain academic critics felt for women's fiction of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. For instance, Beresford-Howe's novels have been read by many (generally much less educated) women who approach her work through an "authentic realist" reading; that is, they follow with great interest the experience of the female protagonist and apply her experience to their own. Authentic realism as a position is anti-theoretical in nature, hence its disparagement by academic critics. "The majority of women use this method when they are

reading texts for pleasure....They gain solidarity and insight into their [own] position [as women]" by adopting this reading stance (Mills et al. 54). Authentic realist readings assume that women's writing represents the shared experience of women, an unpopular position in the anti-realist, fractured view of experience privileged in the academic world.

While not a radical feminist in sympathy or practice, Beresford-Howe does share much with contemporary women writers who are largely radical feminist in their concerns. The topics "which enjoy primacy in women's fiction at the moment are, on the whole, radical feminist in emphasis....Women's community and motherhood dominate fiction today" (Palmer 3). "[Women] writers deliberately choose to prioritize those categories of women and aspects of female experience which the representational practices of the dominant phallocratic culture tend to marginalize or even erase. Black women, women who identify as lesbians, 'spinsters', older and elderly women are examples. Important themes include woman-identified relationships, lesbian motherhood and relations between mothers and daughters" (Palmer 3). Beresford-Howe certainly conforms to this tradition in terms of her concern with mothering, mother-daughter relations, the plight of elderly and widowed women, and the ambivalence of women in their various roles. She also shares with her feminist contemporaries a more general concern with "the female quest for self-discovery,...a theme which - as Elizabeth Wilson points out - was extremely popular with women writing in the 1970s"<sup>5</sup> (Palmer 115). More

pointedly, in 1973 Beresford-Howe emerged from her twenty-year hiatus from writing with her novel The Book of Eve, a work that explores the emerging female identity of an elderly woman, placing Beresford-Howe firmly in step with younger women novelists.

Thus the novels of Beresford-Howe, in their exploration of "female freedom",<sup>6</sup> can be seen to reflect the major debates in feminist theory. As such, her novels are best understood in light of Paulina Palmer's thesis that contemporary women's writing as a whole encompasses the contradictory stances taken in these theoretical feminist debates. In other words, women's novels can be read as a microcosm of the debates within feminism. Beresford-Howe's novels contain multiple ambiguities, contradictions, inconsistencies, and rich complexities. Her attitude towards her female characters and feminism itself is at best ambivalent--vacillating between the indisputably conservative and the dynamically revolutionary. These inconsistencies are notable not because they constitute the basis upon which we can evaluate and dismiss Beresford-Howe's vision as unsuccessfully reflecting a feminist agenda, but because they mirror the state of feminist theory--itself full of contradictions and inconsistencies. Beresford-Howe is neither reactive nor proactive. She follows a middle way, a via media between the extreme forms of feminism that many feminist theorists posit.<sup>7</sup> She charts a careful course between what Judith Stacey labels "pro-family conservative feminism", on the one hand, and the more political forms of

radical feminism, on the other. For these reasons, Beresford-Howe's novels can be seen to constitute a loosely defined version of what Angela Miles calls the "integrative feminine principle."<sup>8</sup>

Miles's definition of integrative feminism is offered from the point of view of an economist and a sociologist, as well as from that of a self-described radical feminist trying to reconcile the extreme strains of feminism. Integrative feminism seeks not only to integrate the personal and the political, as did early versions of radical feminism, but seeks specifically to integrate traditional female roles into the public sphere of valued work.<sup>9</sup> Miles defines the integrative feminine principle as, collectively, "the traditionally defined female characteristics" such as "caring, sharing, co-operation, intuition and emotion" ("Integrative Feminism" 485). Miles celebrates such traditional women's roles as mother, wife, daughter, and sister, and she sees in these roles women's empowerment. Miles sees these roles as empowering the women who choose them because they are specifically female functions and embody the characteristics that enable women to occupy positions of equality in society. Miles argues further that typical female attributes such as the capacity to nurture, to share, to care, and to cooperate, offer some balance to the overt political power ascribed to men. When she discusses women's roles, she assumes that these typical feminine attributes and pursuits will occur in the context of both male and female enlightenment--that is, that these traditional roles will be celebrated with the

assumption that women are free from the oppressive patriarchal definitions that demanded they accept these roles in subservience--that women themselves choose these traditional roles.

Miles refers specifically to literature, suggesting that her notion of women's specificity and equality is applicable to women writers as well as to fictional characters. She refers to

Students of art history and literature...analyzing the specifically female sensibility they find in women's work...discovering or rediscovering, for instance, the articulation of the integrative feminine principle in the works of such writers as Virginia Woolf and Margaret Atwood, and relating this to the distinct and long invisible, specific characteristics and experience of women defined by the domestic sphere. (Miles, "Integrative" 490)

Beresford-Howe consistently represents her women characters in terms of these roles, and this delineation of character is one reason why Miles's tenets are useful in a study of Beresford-Howe's writing.

The ambivalent views on feminist issues suggested by Constance Beresford-Howe's fiction find many other parallels in feminist theory, from such early feminist notions as androgyny to more recent ideas of integrative feminism. From the early formulations of sexual politics--the first recognition by early feminists that male-female relations are not simply private and personal relations but political ones,<sup>10</sup> feminists have been embroiled in debates characterized by their ambivalence on many issues. If feminists accept that relationships between men and women, which were once considered private, are actually political constructs, with their attendant manipulations of power, how can

relations with men ever be desirable at all? Paulina Palmer elaborates:

Some of the questions which women ask hinge on the theme of voluntarism and its limitations. Are relations with men invariably oppressive, or are men capable of reconstructing their sexuality along non-macho lines? To what degree are we able to modify and transform our personal lives and living structures to conform to feminist principles? If we do succeed, what will be the practical result? Will it alter, to any noticeable extent, the imbalance of power between the sexes in the public sector of the labour market and the economy? (144)

Once enlightened to the ideas of female oppression, women writers, naturally attuned and sensitive to female crises, must accept the reality of power relations in heterosexual relationships (or non-sexual relations between men and women) as essentially informed by power politics. Then what? Women writers like Beresford-Howe, raised with ideas of woman's place in the home and its attendant notions of subordination, begin to reflect this debate in their fiction, a debate which theorists label the "problematization of heterosexuality".<sup>11</sup> How were women writers to reflect this newly exposed dimension of male-female relations and still present heterosexual relationships truthfully? They did so, as in the novels of Beresford-Howe, with deep and perhaps unresolvable contradictions.

But, as has already been explained, Angela Miles posits that women's traditional roles and the attributes associated with those roles belong specifically to women and serve, in contrast to what many feminists have argued, as a source of women's strength and as a vehicle for achieving equality and specificity

in a patriarchal society. Earlier (as well as more recent) feminists have strongly disagreed with what Miles advances as a legitimate argument for women to gain equality and recognition of important traditional roles. Among early theorists,

feminists of such widely divergent positions as Juliet Mitchell (1966), Shulamith Firestone (1970), and Simone de Beauvoir (1953) all based their challenge to society on the rejection of women's special relationships to what they agreed was the animal and less than human sphere of reproduction on the one hand, and on the claiming of 'male' characteristics and capabilities for women on the other, rather than on the questioning of the patently ideological devaluing of reproduction and its relegation to semi-human status. (Miles, "Integrative Feminism" 485) <sup>12</sup>

These earlier feminist theorists rejected women's traditional roles, seeing them as patriarchal strategies for cementing women's oppression and suppression into the private sphere. They urged women to throw off the shackles of motherhood and domestic drudgery, and to strive to be more like men: more aggressive, more forceful, and better able to seize and maintain power. This model of androgyny privileged traditionally male attributes of strength, power, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and so on.

It is important here to distinguish, as Miles does, between an essentialist view of men and women that ascribes certain characteristics to biology and a psychosocial view of gender. Specific and traditionally ascribed attributes, most feminists (including Miles) argue, have resulted from social and cultural conditioning, rather than from biological characteristics. Femininity and masculinity are created by how our society has defined maleness and femaleness according to these qualities. Men

are aggressive and competitive because they have been raised to be so; women are nurturing and caring for the same reason. Miles rejects essentialism in saying:

The integrative feminine principle...should not be confused with the positing of an essentially feminine nature and sensibility. The latter view asserts a feminine essence, which contains all that is good in humanity, in opposition to the oppression and destruction of civilization which is ascribed to maleness itself; it posits as its aim the establishment of a free and good all-female society. It thus accepts the dominant ideological presentation of a "natural"/ biological separation of human characteristics between male and female and the division of humanity into two species.... ("Integrative Feminism" 485)

Instead, the integrative feminine principle

asserts that men and women are of the same nature but, unlike...early feminist radicalism, it does not do this by insisting that women are just like (as good as) men. Instead it recognizes that although men and women ultimately share the same human existence, in the process of civilization certain human characteristics, capabilities and activities have been labeled as feminine and their practice has been largely restricted to women and the female sphere of reproduction and personal relations. (Miles, "Integrative Feminism" 485-486)

Recent radical feminists also have sharply criticized Miles's ideas, accusing maternal and integrative feminists of being reactionary and retrogressive. Judith Stacey launches an attack on what she calls the new "conservative pro-family feminism", which emerged in the 1980s. Conservative pro-family feminism is characterized by three elements: first, a repudiation of the fundamental feminist notion of sexual politics, which is seen as threatening to personal relationships, and thus to "the family"; second, an affirmation of differences between women and

men and a celebration of traditional feminine qualities, especially those associated with mothering;<sup>13</sup> and third, a belief that "struggle against male domination detracts from political agendas [conservative pro-family feminists] consider more important" (Stacey 222). Stacey identifies such feminist theorists as Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, as "the three most significant voices" belonging to this new brand of feminism (220). She argues that the writing of Friedan and Greer, in particular, has become increasingly conservative as the Women's Movement progresses.<sup>14</sup> (Elshtain's has been consistently reactionary, in Stacey's view.) She views the tempering of their radicalism as a defeat for feminism. She also acknowledges that the emergence of this conservative feminism signals the need for more radical feminists to examine some of the issues fuelling a conservative vision. These issues include: "the rather thorny question of whether it is possible to reconcile fully egalitarian relationships with long-term commitment" in either heterosexual or homosexual relations (Stacey 240); "the need for more developed feminist theories of child development" (Stacey 241); and the need to articulate a feminist position on heterosexuality.<sup>15</sup> Stacey recognizes that none of these issues will be resolved easily, because feminism itself is an uneasy balancing of diverse, often contradictory, points of view. She criticizes the conservative pro-family feminists for suggesting that feminism is "monolithically antimaternal", noting instead that "contemporary feminist visions

are actually characterized by unresolved tension between advocating androgyny and celebrating traditionally female, and especially maternal, values" (237). She suggests that "instead of celebrating the feminine, we need to retain a vital tension between androgynous and female-centred visions. We need to recognize contradiction and to apply a critical perspective that distinguishes between giving value to traditionally female qualities and celebrating the female in a universalistic and essentialist manner" (Stacey 237).

While Judith Stacey does not engage the arguments of integrative feminists such as Angela Miles, we can position Miles and her vision between the extreme conservatism Stacey attacks, on the one hand, and the radical feminism that Stacey espouses, on the other. At the same time, however, this positioning is complicated by the fact that Miles celebrates traditional female values, while Stacey represents the contemporary androgynous position. (I say "contemporary" because she is not as vehement or insistent on this position as de Beauvoir and other early feminists were.) Stacey describes her view of feminism as a preference for "gender justice", with the goal being "the ultimate transcendence of gender as a rigid social tracking system" (242). This goal is in opposition to "woman justice", wherein feminists adopt "a woman-identified stance as the best strategy toward the goal of equality between women and men" (Stacey 242). Stacey points out that, unfortunately, "for a good many feminists, woman identification can become an end in itself,

and one that can lead to...a retreat from politics, or that can evolve into a simple affirmation of femaleness" (242). She accuses conservative feminists of such practices. Despite her celebration of traditional female values, Angela Miles nonetheless avoids the trap of woman identification. In fact, she manages to balance political engagement and celebration of traditional female values, and, again, it is precisely this equilibrium that makes her theory so applicable to Beresford-Howe's fiction.

Germaine Greer is another early feminist whose writing over the years reflects many of the inconsistencies so characteristic of an emerging feminist consciousness (and one apparent in almost all feminist fiction--whether radical or conservative in nature). In her first, most radical book, The Female Eunuch (1971), Greer rejects the imprisoning roles women have been forced to serve, and argues for women's sexual and political liberation. While Greer is critical of women's entrenched (and enforced) passivity, she also enumerates the natural qualities of women that spell humanity's salvation: if not women, "who will safeguard the despised animal faculties of compassion, empathy, innocence and sensuality?" (Eunuch 114). Similarly, her strongest hope for the success of the women's movement lies in her belief in women's sisterly qualities. She posits that "the essential factor in the liberation of married woman is understanding of her condition...Her best aides in such an assessment are her sisters" (Greer, Eunuch 323, my italics). Greer claims that

experience is too costly a teacher: we cannot all marry in order to investigate the situation. The older sisters must teach us what they found out. At all times we must learn from each other's experience, and not judge hastily or snobbishly, or according to masculine criteria. We must fight against the tendency to form a feminist elite, or a masculine hierarchy of authority in our political structures, and struggle to maintain cooperation and the matriarchal principle of fraternity. (Eunuch 329, my italics)

Writing years later of a summer spent in Italy in 1967, Greer again emphasizes the positive qualities traditionally--and in her view, correctly and necessarily--ascribed to women:

Everything I learn reinforces my conviction that the only corrective to social inequality, cruelty and callousness, is to be found in values which, if we cannot call them female, can be called sororal. They are the opposite of competitiveness, acquisitiveness and domination, and may be summed up by the word 'co-operation'. In the world of sisterhood, all deserve care and attention, including the very old, the very young, the imbecile and the outsider. The quality of daily life is what matters, the taste of the food on the table, the light in the room, the peace and wholeness of the moment. (Introduction to Madwoman xxvi)

Greer also points out the contradictions inherent in the Women's Movement, based on her learning about women in other cultures: "It never occurred to me to assume that woman in technological society was happier or worthier than woman in other worlds, nor would I ever have supposed that women's liberation involved the jettisoning of their history, their traditional occupations or their forms of creative expression" (Introduction to Madwoman xxvii). Implicit in this observation is the realization that feminism --especially the early brand of feminism that encouraged women to reject their traditional,

imprisoning roles--involves great losses for women. Greer's experience of living with the women of Calabria helped her to "realize that [her] dissatisfaction with the feminine mystique<sup>16</sup> stemmed partly from the view of another kind of womanliness, of women as adults, women as workers, women as female rather than feminine" (Introduction to Madwoman xxiii). Here she attempts to redefine--but only in one sense--the definition of woman. For the definition that Greer proposes is simply a new way of viewing women's traditional roles--of worker, mother, caregiver, nurturer, co-operator.

These are the roles, of course, to which Angela Miles returns and the view of women that she celebrates in the integrative feminine principle. This principle seeks to integrate feminism and women's traditional roles, and the private world of women's experience with the public and political experience of feminism in its attempt to bring about the liberation of women. Opponents of Miles' view of integrative feminism are many, and they include radical feminists of different persuasions. (Miles is herself a self-defined radical feminist, in her conviction of the need for political action to liberate women and in her concern with the social burdens women are often forced to carry.) Many feminist critics see Miles's theory (and others like it) as a step backward for women; they see this view as expressing discomfort with the progress women have made, especially in the public realm. Such feminists ask pragmatically: What of advances in the availability of daycare, the social acceptability of

working mothers, unmarried career women, and so on? Don't theories such as Miles's place women squarely back in the realm of oppression and domination from which the Women's Movement sought to release them?

The issue with which such concerned critics fail to engage (ironically) is that of women's choice. If all feminists could agree on the primary goal of the Women's Movement, that goal would be women's freedom to choose. Staunch feminists who argue that women must be liberated from the home fail to recognize that many women choose and enjoy their traditional roles, and that these roles in fact are empowering in terms of male-female power politics. They fail to realize that many women only need for these roles and choices to be validated by both women and men.

Other feminists who reject the ideas of Miles sometimes invoke the image of the all-powerful mother who feeds on and smothers all those in her care.<sup>17</sup> While this matriarchal monster is indeed an oppressive image of women's empowerment, it is not the image of motherhood implied or celebrated by Miles and other supporters of women's traditional roles. Nor is it the maternal figure who inhabits Beresford-Howe's fiction. The fiction, like feminism itself, challenges this and other institutionalized images of motherhood. The institutionalization of traditional roles of women is a common target of much feminist criticism and fiction, and Beresford-Howe is no exception. Like Angela Miles's, Beresford-Howe's vision seeks to integrate the experience of women in the redefinition of their traditional roles, in an

attempt to reclaim these roles that have been institutionalized by patriarchal society.<sup>18</sup> As a result, Beresford-Howe highlights the experience of individual women, explores the qualities and role of the traditional caregiver, rejects the patriarchal construct of "good" and "bad" mothering, questions the woman's devaluation of her own body, and offers her female characters opportunities to redefine their roles.

Not only does Beresford-Howe's fiction reflect the complex debates within feminism itself, but it also challenges the institutionalization of women's traditional roles by advancing her own eclectic brand of "integrative" feminism. The female caregivers of Beresford-Howe's novels--whether sisters, daughters, mothers, or wives--are characterized in various, often ambiguous, but always complex ways. In her depiction of these women in their traditional roles, Beresford-Howe offers a vision of women redefining these institutionalized roles to empower themselves, to meet their own needs, and to achieve autonomous self-identity.

Notes to Chapter 1

- 1 Among Canadian women writers, we might include Ethel Wilson, Margaret Laurence, and Mavis Gallant.
- 2 Elaine Showalter discusses "women's difference" in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", which first appeared in Critical Inquiry 8 (Winter 1981): 179-205, and is reprinted in The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory. Ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 243-270.
- 3 To date, Beresford-Howe's work has been examined critically in just two articles published in scholarly journals: Andrea O'Reilly's "Feminizing Feminism: Constance Beresford-Howe and the Quest for Female Freedom," Canadian Woman Studies, 8 no 3 (Fall 1987): 69-72, and Lorraine McMullen's "Images of Women in Canadian Literature: Woman as Hero," Atlantis 2, No 2, Part II (1977): 134-142. McMullen's article briefly treats one Beresford-Howe novel, The Book of Eve, while O'Reilly focuses her attention on the "Voices of Eve" trilogy: The Book of Eve, A Population of One, and The Marriage Bed. In A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel. Second Edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), John Moss addresses only one Beresford-Howe novel, The Book of Eve. The early and most recent novels have received no critical consideration at all.
- 4 Beresford-Howe's novels have enjoyed a steady following by readers of popular fiction. Sympathetic reviews of her novels have appeared consistently in such popular and women's magazines as Chatelaine, Saturday Night, MacLean's, Quill & Ouire, and Canadian Forum, while reviewers in more academic literary journals such as Canadian Literature, Books in Canada, Queen's Quarterly, and The Fiddlehead, when they do review her novels, have tended to disparage her work and underrate her achievement.
- 5 Elizabeth Wilson, "I'll Climb the Stairway to Heaven: Lesbianism in the Seventies," in Sex and Love: new thoughts on old contradictions. Ed. Sue Cartledge and Joanna Ryan (London: Women's Press, 1983) 192.
- 6 In numerous interviews, Beresford-Howe herself identifies "female freedom" as one of her major thematic concerns; see Karen Mulhallen, Books in Canada 7 (January 1978): 31-32.
- 7 Taking the middle way is said to be a typically Canadian position. See, for example, Gerald Lynch, "The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles," Canadian Literature No 130 (Autumn 1991): 94.
- 8 I am indebted to Andrea O'Reilly for drawing upon Angela

Miles' notion of integrative feminism in order to illuminate Beresford-Howe's position vis-a-vis feminist theory. Unlike O'Reilly, who concludes that Beresford-Howe reflects an anti-feminist view in her work, I will use Miles' theory to illustrate Beresford-Howe's peculiar brand of "integrated" feminism.

- 9 Miles explains that because "the structure of women's work [has] denied women the labour/leisure dichotomy of men,...as soon as women saw any of their activity as work they had to see it all as work. Their sense of their total existence as [unpaid] work opened the way for the struggle for total liberation" ("Integrative" 482). More pointedly, "the wages for housework campaign...directed attention to the sphere of reproduction as well as the work force and countered society's overvaluation of the sphere of production" ("Integrative" 488). She continues in the same article: "The clear unifying theme of [integrative feminist] literature is a concern to understand and to transform the sphere of reproduction and its relations as key to the universal, liberatory transformation of people and production" (489). Specifically to my concerns, integrative feminists "have begun...to question the dominant definition of humanity by opening up new personal and political territory in which motherhood is affirmed as a uniquely important and human, specifically female activity, at the same time as its necessity for all women, its instinctual basis and its biologically 'natural' association with women is denied" (490).
- 10 One of the first theorists to politicize personal relations was Kate Millett in her book Sexual Politics (New York: Avon, 1971).
- 11 Undoubtedly, the concept of the "problematization of heterosexuality" is "a feature of contemporary feminist thought" (Palmer 47). "Radical feminists draw attention to the contradictions which relations with men involve for feminists....[Angela] Hamblin points out that 'feminists in heterosexual relationships have to grapple with male definitions, male assumptions and male power in one of the most intimate areas of our lives, involving some of our deepest feelings' (105)" (Palmer 55). This problematization "has its basis in the perception that sexuality and sexual practice, rather than being 'natural', are cultural constructs" (Palmer 47). "The recognition of the cultural construction of sexuality carries, of course, profound implications for women. It opens our eyes to the control which a male supremacist culture exerts on the sexual aspects of our lives" (Palmer 48).
- 12 Juliet Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution," New Left Review 41 (1967): 11-37; Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic

of Sex (New York: Morrow, 1970); Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953).

- 13 In this celebration of traditional feminine qualities and the mothering role, pro-family feminism resembles integrative feminism, although both Stacey and Miles would assert that the pro-family feminists insist on the superiority of this role over all others, while radical and integrative feminists are fundamentally committed to women's choice.
- 14 Interestingly, in 1971 with The Female Eunuch (Great Britain: McKibbin & Kee, 1971), Greer distinguished herself emphatically from Betty Friedan, whom she viewed as reactionary in her approach to women's issues: "She represents the cream of American middle-class womanhood, and what she wants for them is equality of opportunity within the status quo, free admission to the world of the ulcer and the coronary.... Clearly, what Mrs. Friedan suggests cannot be at all radical" (Greer 296).
- 15 Stacey recognizes that "feminist theory is vulnerable in its treatment of heterosexuality. We have done a better job of criticizing heterosexuality as institution and practice (and thereby briefly driving analysis of it underground for many feminists) than studying its history or appreciating its complexity and continued vitality even for feminists" (241). She acknowledges that "within the movement, heterosexuality among other forms of sexuality has been considered 'politically incorrect'" (Stacey 241). Stacey agrees with the conservative pro-family feminists in their criticism of the fact that "female heterosexuality as well as female anti-feminism are often presumed by feminists to be signifiers of false consciousness, the successful product of patriarchal hegemony" (241). She concurs that "this concept won't do" (Stacey 241).
- 16 Greer here makes reference to Betty Friedan's book The Feminine Mystique (New York: Norton, 1963).
- 17 This image of the all-consuming, suffocating mother/monster was made popular by such 1960s and 1970s psychoanalysts as R.D. Laing. See for example R.D. Laing and A. Esterson, Sanity, Madness and the Family (London: Tavistock, 1964).
- 18 In Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York and London: Norton, 1976; 1986), Adrienne Rich distinguishes between "two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential - and all women - shall remain under male control" (13).

## *Chapter Two*

### *Traditional Roles: Women as Helpers*

In From Private to Public, Amy Rossiter describes the figure of the "sister/mother" as a helper, caretaker, and nurturer who provides support to others, especially women and children, by temporarily relieving the mother of her duties. This role is empowering not only because it provides a basis for a woman's identity, but also because it offers valuable work suited to the caregiver's nurturing qualities. In many cases, the helper role allows women to connect with others--and especially with other women--in mutually enriching relationships. Constance Beresford-Howe's fiction contains many examples of this helping figure; the maiden or spinster aunt of Beresford-Howe's novels also belongs in this role. I will be examining such characters as Olive Pymson in Of this Day's Journey (1947), Hannah Jackson in The Invisible Gate (1949), Elynor in My Lady Greensleeves (1955), Willy Doyle in A Population of One (1977), and Nan Weston in Prospero's Daughter (1988), in terms of this sister/mother/aunt role. All of these characters, to a greater or lesser degree, play a substitute mother and helper role in Beresford-Howe's fiction. In these novels, Beresford-Howe explores the qualities and

complexities of the caregiver's role, privileging this traditionally undervalued role and demonstrating how it can potentially empower and enhance women's identities.

Many of the relationships I will be examining are eccentric to the ostensible focus of each novel; especially in the early novels, the main plots are conventional romance plots. The subtextual relations between characters emerge as more interesting and more illustrative of Beresford-Howe's eclectic blend of feminist and conservative ideology; her ambivalent portrayal of women in various traditional and untraditional roles, as well as her exploration of relations between characters, are most significant in the subtext of the novels. Because my interest lies outside the novels' main plots, and because some of these works are unknown and scarcely available, some brief paraphrasing and context-setting will be necessary.

In Beresford-Howe's early novel, Of this Day's Journey (1947), the secondary female character, Olive Pymson, emerges as a much more interesting figure in her traditional female role than does the main female character, Camilla Brant. Cam is distinctive both as a fictional representation of womanhood and as a woman inhabiting the world of the novel: she is a young (only twenty-five years old), accomplished Lecturer of English at an American university of the 1940s. She is also a headstrong, passionate character, a romantic heroine of fine ilk. As such, she is not the figure upon whom my attention will be focused in this chapter. My main interest lies with the character of Olive

Pymson, Andrew Cameron's loyal secretary of many years, and Cam's substitute mother for the duration of her stay at the college.

We are first introduced to Olive Pymson in the opening pages of the novel. In fact, the novel begins with Olive as narrator. The tone of Olive's narration gives us many clues to her personality: dry, witty, bitter, sarcastic, lonely; she is self-described as having a face like the "caricature of an old maid" (9). Cam touches her life profoundly; in fact, Cam begins to turn Olive's world upside down from the opening pages. Olive opens her home to Cam in a fit of good will, sure that this spirited girl will add some excitement to her rather tedious, routine existence. This prediction is quite accurate: Cam's arrival in the small college town brings the relationships of the major characters into sharp, careful focus, sometimes with devastating results. Olive discovers through her contact with Cam that experiencing one's own emotions--something Olive has carefully avoided in her life--can be both exhilarating and painful.

Olive's relationship with Cam is the most intense friendship she has ever experienced. Their relationship is portrayed in the novel as something quite special and wonderful. Olive, in the rare moments in which she abandons her caustic tone, describes moments of joy shared with Cam: little domestic scenes of getting along well together, and long talks in which they share confidences and discuss their feelings and frustrations. Towards the end of Cam's first week of living with Olive, Olive describes one such moment of communion and contentment: "I was silent too,

absorbed in a curious new sensation I'd felt before that week, but had not yet succeeded in naming. As we took our leave, it had deepened into a mood of mellow relaxation. And on the way home it occurred to me with the suddenness of an entirely new idea, that I was happy" (42). Olive evidently has discovered in Cam a true friend capable of stirring dormant emotions of caring and love.

Their friendship is all the more special set against the threatening and negative relationships that prevail among the women of the novel. Two relationships against which the friendship between Olive and Cam is contrasted are the tense relations between Marny, Andrew's handicapped wife, and Olive, and the strained acquaintance of Marny and Cam. Olive feels distaste for the way in which Marny pities herself and makes life difficult for Andrew by complaining about her disability and the boredom she feels. We discover by the end of Olive's narration that part of her exasperation with Marny stems from her unrequited love and admiration for Andrew. Similar tensions underlie Cam's relations with Marny; Cam feels a falseness in their visits, because she is passionately in love with Marny's husband, Andrew, and carries the burden of knowing that he feels love in return, but chooses to remain with his wife, though he has once been unfaithful with Cam. In one visit, Marny talks to Cam of the unlikeliness of two women becoming friends. When Cam makes a comment about feeling uneasy around cats because "'We have too much in common to be very good friends'," Marny comments that two pretty women--or any two women--have the same

difficulty becoming friends (86). Marny then implies that two women with "strong" personalities are also unlikely to become friends (86). Cam shows herself to be above Marny's petty attempts to undermine another woman, and Beresford-Howe may well be debunking the traditional conception of "cattiness" in female friendships. Their interchange reveals Marny's cattiness, coyness, and sense of being in competition with other women for men.

In contrast to this competitiveness and jealousy, Olive and Cam's open, honest, and caring relationship seems much the preferable. Beresford-Howe gives the friendship an even greater valuation by showing that it transcends the implicit rivalry between Olive and Cam for Andrew's affection, implicit because Olive poses no real threat to the fulfilment of Cam's desires and does not interfere in their affair. In essence, the fulfilment of Olive's love for Andrew is her own fantasy, never close to being realized, while Cam's desires are threateningly real and bring her deep suffering. Despite this unstated rivalry, their friendship is never threatened; Olive values Cam too highly to risk jeopardizing their relationship by making an issue of her unrequited love for Andrew. Olive puts the interests of her close friend before her own desires, thereby illustrating the qualities of sorority that both Angela Miles and Jane Lazarre celebrate: those qualities of caring, nurturing, and giving.<sup>1</sup>

Most importantly, their relationship is also one in which Olive acts the mother, concerned about Cam, the young woman

living under the same roof, and thus under her care. Beresford-Howe paints a number of scenes of domestic comfort shared by the two women: Olive and Cam cooking dinner together, or Olive preparing a special meal for Cam, or chaperoning Cam at the school dance and rescuing her from lecherous Larry, or taking in a breakfast tray for Cam after a serious night of correcting papers or enjoying a party. Also poignantly depicted is Olive's concern for Cam's evident suffering as her passion for Andrew deepens and the situation becomes increasingly complicated, leading to no resolution but for Cam to leave. Olive's feelings of motherly anxiety and concern escalate to the point that, on the day that Cam prepares to leave the town, Olive calls Andrew and begs him to change his mind and speak with Cam. Olive acts as Cam's protector, looking out for her interests and acutely aware of and concerned with Cam's emotional states. She is also Cam's greatest support, providing soothing comfort--bodily and emotional. In these ways, then, Olive belongs to the tradition of the motherly aunt figure, concerned for the welfare and well-being of another person, and willing to offer support when needed. Beresford-Howe's portrayal of the close relationship between Cam and Olive, while not presented as the main plot of the novel, is significant in its characterization of Olive as a helper and mother substitute to Cam. Through this role, Olive emerges as a woman with a unique identity and valuable function. Furthermore, by serving this role, she is enriched by her friendship with Cam and by the opportunity to experience her own

emotions.

Hannah Jackson in The Invisible Gate (1949) plays a role similar to that played by Olive Pymson, except that Hannah is literally a surrogate mother to a houseful of needy children and young adults. More than a substitute mother, Hannah is also sister to twenty-year-old Laurel and younger brother Penfield. She is also responsible for the welfare of her niece Fan, the two-year-old daughter of her dead elder brother. Hannah, age twenty-three, is herself barely grown up, although her experience has forced her to be wise beyond her years. She emerges in the novel as a truly self-sacrificing, caring, and sisterly figure, concerned to a large degree with the welfare of those who depend on her and need her protection. Even the novel's male figures, Noel Carter and Will Ames, see her as an essentially maternal and sororal figure: nurturing, giving, and caring.

Hannah suffers through a series of crises evolving from her growing passion for Noel Carter--evil incarnate, as Beresford-Howe melodramatically personifies him. The major plot conflicts for Hannah lie in her waning romantic interest in Will Ames, the man she is expected to marry, and her love for Noel, a man of questionable morals whom she knows to be less than an ideal partner for her. Complicating these feelings are her domestic burdens and the increasingly difficult responsibility of helping her younger sister and brother to survive the growing pains of adolescence. The action takes a turn for the worse when Noel, although he loves Hannah, pursues her sister Laurel, who will

inherit forty thousand dollars a few months later when she turns twenty-one. Forced to choose between her unreasonable passion for the evil Noel and her intuitive protectiveness and long-standing love for her misguided sister Laurel, Hannah sacrifices her own desire and saves her sister from Noel's greed and malevolence.

In spite of the novel's melodramatic plot, the issues with which Hannah grapples are engaging, and illustrate again Beresford-Howe's complex depiction and, ultimately, positive valuation of the sister/mother role played by Hannah. Hannah is an extremely admirable female character, exhibiting self-possession while still allowing herself to experience a full range of emotions. Like Cam Brant in Of this Day's Journey, she is an exceptional woman for her time, a kind of 1940s Superwoman: a legal secretary (the only job for which she earns any money and which pays the family's living expenses), as well as full-time substitute mother and housekeeper. Her competence in all capacities is made clear to the reader: she is a valuable employee at the office, and a talented caregiver and caretaker at home. She coordinates and completes an endless string of household tasks with energy and thoroughness. The drudgery of housework is carefully catalogued and quantified by the author, so that the reader gains both a strong appreciation of Hannah's resilience and strength, as well as a good idea of how valuable a role she plays in making the mechanism of the Jackson family function smoothly. She is a capable delegator as well, getting even sickly Laurel and Pen, her teenaged brother, involved in

helping with the household chores. Near the end of the novel, Beresford-Howe gives an unambiguous indication of the value she places on the personal realm of the home and of the domestic work that is completed there; Hannah observes that the caregiver's house is a microcosm for the whole world--full of drama, conflict, and caring (210). Not only does the author collapse the boundaries between the private and public worlds, she also raises the private world to the high level normally assigned to the public sphere, giving the home a status rarely attributed to it in fiction, especially fiction of this period.

In her mothering role, Hannah is patient and loving with her young niece, Fan, whose own mother has opted out of that role to pursue a career and to secure a new husband. We are shown various scenes in which the lives of Hannah and little Fan are mutually enriched by their love for one another. One such scene occurs when Hannah, feeling overwhelmed by the juggling act in which she is constantly engaged, agrees to send Fan back to her mother, who is remarrying. However, once the conflict with Noel and Laurel is resolved, Hannah decides to keep Fan (199). Beresford-Howe deliberately includes these details about Hannah's attachment to the little girl, and, indeed, they are central to the resolution of Hannah's personal struggle with the power of evil, as personified by her fascination with Noel. When she triumphs over her passion, by choosing her sister's welfare over the consummation of her own desires, she also regains her sense of obligation to her young niece.

Both Noel and Will are attracted by Hannah's practical, down-to-earth, and nurturing qualities; both men are motherless, as are so many characters in the troubled worlds of Beresford-Howe's fiction (including Hannah herself). Hannah appeals to the men's desire for order and goodness in the world, since they have witnessed firsthand the chaos and evil of war. She functions as helper to both, trying (unsuccessfully) to reform Noel in his wicked ways, and acting as a sort of redeemer for Will at the end of the novel, as he tries to raise himself out of the despondency he has been feeling since his return from the war. He is encouraged to make some sense of his life as their original friendship and interest in one another are rekindled.

Finally, Hannah's role as helper and mother/sister is most emphatic in the depiction of her relationship with her younger sister, Laurel. Though only a few years older than Laurel, Hannah is much more mature and responsible. Laurel is the typically fragile young lady who needs to be guided and protected by an older, more sophisticated woman, ideally a mother or sister. From the beginning of the novel, we find Hannah worrying about Laurel's ill health, her lack of strength, her rebellious decision to stay out later than Hannah advises, her impracticality, her questionable choice of friends, and her general weakness of character. Hannah and Laurel have been very close, if not in temperament or personality, at least in their experience of growing up together; they share a bedroom and a double bed, and are in the habit of curling up together to stay

warm and sleep well. We see genuine affection of one for the other.

Their relationship sours when Hannah confronts Laurel, suggesting that Noel is courting her in order to gain access to her inheritance. Laurel refuses to believe Hannah, convinced that her sister is motivated by jealousy. Hannah, of course, is stung by Laurel's lack of trust and respect. When Hannah finds a torn copy of a letter Noel has written to his business associates, which details his plans to invest Laurel's forty thousand dollars in a business venture as soon as he marries her and gains control of her money,<sup>2</sup> she shows it to Laurel, who must finally admit that she is being used by Noel. Unfortunately for Hannah, the two sisters are not reconciled, although the novel offers the hope that they will be when Laurel returns from a convalescence in the mountains. Most significant is the fact that Hannah puts her sister's well-being before her own desires, because in revealing Noel's true motives to Laurel, Hannah loses Noel forever. By the end of the novel, Hannah is reconciled to this loss; after Noel's unscrupulous manipulation of her sister, she no longer finds him attractive. Hannah embraces her helping role to such an extent that it comes to define her identity, her sense of self-worth, and, ultimately, her happiness. The positive valuation she receives from her family and her positioning as the narrator and as the character with whom the reader most closely identifies, empower Hannah in her sister/mother role.

We see further development in Beresford-Howe's attitudes

towards women finding value and strength in traditional female roles in My Lady Greensleeves (1955), a historical novel set in the sixteenth century. Not only does Avys Winter, the novel's female protagonist, return to wifedom after leaving her demanding husband, but her sister-in-law, Elynor, is characterized chiefly through her helping, sisterly relationship with Avys. In My Lady Greensleeves, Elynor, Piers Winters' sister and his wife's close confidante, is the helper figure, like Olive Pymson in Of this Day's Journey. Like Hannah Jackson in The Invisible Gate, Elynor is also the mother/sister (literally, sister-in-law) figure who acts as protectress to Avys and her children. The novel clearly delineates the close friendship between Avys and Elynor, and emphasizes the importance of Elynor's role as surrogate mother to Avys' children and as supporter--emotional and physical--of Avys herself. This role assigned to Elynor defines and empowers her in her personal relations with her brother Piers, in a manner that anticipates Angela Miles' integrative feminine principle, and makes her valuable to Avys and her daughters Katherine and Griselda. Again, because these latter relationships comprise a subtext in the novel, some positioning of the subtext in terms of the main plot is necessary.

Elynor, "Piers' dark vivacious sister" (9) and a widow, is characterized initially in relation to Avys, her sister-in-law. The two women are shown to be in deep sympathy with one another, to the point that Elynor, in an early scene, can correctly divine the cause of Avys's unhappy silence as they sit together in front

of the fire before dinner: "In one glance Elynor's intelligent eyes had comprehended everything: the continuing pattern of conflict [between Avys and Piers]; even the dark shadow of the night to come which rested on [Avys]" (10). Throughout, they are shown to be close friends and consorts, in harmony with one another, and with Elynor being especially supportive of Avys.

The trust between the two women supersedes Elynor's feelings of loyalty to her brother, and Avys' faithfulness to her husband; when Avys finds herself willingly seduced by her cousin Henry (Hal) Brandon, she seeks Elynor's advice and confidence. Avys opens the subject for discussion by asking Elynor if she loved her late husband; Elynor replies that she did not, and candidly replies to Avys' question whether she had a lover:

Elynor broke into a laugh, squeezing her eyes tight shut and showing all her white teeth.

'Dearest, my husband had more flourishing horns than the oldest stag in the forest.'

'Is this true?'

'Come, you shrewdly suspected it a long time ago, I daresay.'

'Do you repent it?'

'Not a whit. One must live. It was a sin, and I repent the sin. But it was joy too, and that I will never repent.'

'Had you no fear?'

'Never.' She hesitated, the sparkle fading from her. A little anxious frown puckered her forehead and narrowed her red lips.

'But it is dangerous to entangle oneself, and much more for some than for others. For you, Avys, now...it would be a different thing altogether. Piers is a violent man.' (38-39)

Elynor's reaction to Avys' hinting at (and eventually confessing to) her affair with Hal Brandon is notable for the concern she shows for Avys' safety and well-being and the lack of concern for

whether her brother is being betrayed by his wife. Elynor's first loyalty is to her beloved sister-in-law, and this gives her power in her relationship with Piers, as will be demonstrated. Elynor warns Avys not to continue her affair with Hal (43), primarily because she might endanger her own welfare as well as that of her children. Elynor's prediction comes alarmingly true.

Admirably, Elynor attempts to give Avys the best possible help and advice in her conflict with Piers. She understands how unhappy Avys is, having been so in her own marriage, but she also tries to provide Avys with a rounded picture of what Avys and Piers' union has been and could still be. Elynor reminds Avys of how happy she was in the early days of her marriage:

'My dear,' she said gently, 'I remember when Kate was a little red-faced girl and Piers built this house...he was so proud of you! Can you tell me with an honest heart you were not happy then? I can see you now hand in hand when he came home from hunting...you've loved him, Avys. I wouldn't wonder to hear you love him yet, for all your quarrels and misery. Can you deny it? Have you not loved Piers?'

'I've forgotten,' Avys said, almost inaudibly.

'You're afraid to remember.' (90-91)

Elynor's wisdom is made evident by the end of the novel, when Avys comes to realize that, beneath all the resentment and pain, she still loves her husband, and that once she has had time to heal these wounds, their mutual love will bring them together again.

Elynor again shows concern and compassion for Avys when Piers finally discovers her affair with Hal and banishes her to solitude at the house in the country, taking the children away

and threatening to divorce her. Elynor begs Piers to reconsider; she is especially concerned with his decision to send the daughters away from their mother in order to punish her. Elynor knows that losing her daughters will be the end of all hope for Avys, and urges Piers to let them remain with Avys (98). When Piers refuses, Elynor suggests the next best thing: to let Elynor herself take care of the girls (98). Initially, Piers agrees with her plan. But when Elynor upsets him by becoming angry at his lack of concern for Avys and her feelings,

He turned on her savagely. The rims of his eyes were red; his open mouth showed the teeth.

'Now hold your tongue! You seem far more loyal to her than to me, your blood. I wonder how long you've known this filth and said nothing? And a good, loyal sister to blame me for her evil! Well, you've made no bones of it - you prefer to be on her side. You're no longer welcome in my house; and my - the girls - I'll dispose of them elsewhere.'

'No, no. Don't forbid me that service...I beg you, Piers.'

'...No, I'll send them to our old cousin, Agnes, the sempstress, up at Hull: they'll do well enough there.'

'That flinty old heart with her penny-father ways! Piers, it will kill them. They have been gently reared ... for God's sake, don't harden your heart against me. If I may not defend her, let me cherish her young ones, at least!'  
(99-100)

This scene perhaps best shows Elynor's helping relationship with Avys, and her role as surrogate mother to Avys' daughters. In spite of her pleading, Piers refuses to allow Elynor to take care of Kate and Grizell, and her prediction again comes true: Grizell does not survive the harsh conditions of living with Cousin Agnes.

Elynor's sisterly role eventually does give her power over

Piers, but only once he has repented his hasty decisions to banish Avys, thus inviting his wife's escape, and to send the girls to Hull, thus bringing about Grizell's death. Some time later, Elynor meets Piers at the funeral of one of Avys' sisters, and they are reconciled, Piers having had a chance to rethink his past actions. When he sees his sister, he is overcome by a flood of happy memories of his past closeness with Elynor and Avys both. At this time, he has also brought Kate back home to live with him, after receiving her letter with the news of Grizell's death and Kate's own suffering at the hands of Cousin Agnes. Piers has developed a new-found respect for his daughter Kate, who is intelligent and competent at keeping his books and answering his mail, and, by implication, for other women.

Finally, Elynor is instrumental in bringing Avys back to the family, and in encouraging the reconciliation between Avys and Piers that closes the novel. During the time of her disappearance, Avys is forced to take up with a gang of thieves to earn her living, and her partner, Adam Piper, an especially cold and cruel man, has been destroying the letters Avys has been writing to Elynor to let her know she is alive and well. When Avys discovers that Piper has not been sending her missives, she arranges to have a letter delivered to Elynor, telling her she will come by Elynor's house. Avys arrives the day before Elynor is to marry a handsome widower who has been courting her. Elynor's anticipation of Avys' visit testifies to the closeness between the two women: "The remembered cadences of that low, full

voice made tears burn Elynor's eyes" (208). When Avys arrives, she learns from Elynor that "'Piers is a man greatly changed'" (210), and is encouraged by Elynor to recall the happy times she and Piers shared:

In a flash of time reversed she saw herself and Piers laughing with pride at Kate's first lurching steps; danced with him clumsily down the long galley with carpenter's shavings still curled everywhere; gave him the primitive comfort of her body when he wept over the white little shell of their first son. A sweet, bitter pain wrung her.

'Don't -' she said [to Elynor]. 'I came only to see you and learn the news of my girls.' (211)

Elynor cannot bear to tell Avys about young Grizell's death, because she sees how weak and tired Avys is. Elynor here acts as caretaker to Avys' bodily needs; she offers Avys some wine, and urges her to rest, to bathe, to get warm, to sleep, promising that no harm will come to Avys in Elynor's house. Avys sleeps through the last-minute wedding preparations and wakes the following day in time to see the end of the ceremony from a hiding spot on the stairs. Here, she sees her daughter, Kate, and, aching to go and embrace her, remarks to herself how closely she resembles her father. She also learns of Griselda's death, overhearing Kate talking to her cousin. Seeing her eldest daughter and experiencing the loss of her youngest, Avys finds the strength to seek out Piers and talk with him, and they are reconciled. Much of their reconciliation has depended on Elynor's actions: her own reconciliation and careful discussion with Piers, and her openness to Avys, making her welcome and comfortable in her home even after not having news of her for

almost a year. In these ways, Elynor plays the caring and helping role of sister and substitute mother--the role of central importance in the worlds of Of this Day's Journey, The Invisible Gate, and My Lady Greensleeves.

Although Beresford-Howe's portrayal of women is somewhat unenlightened in these early (pre-feminist) novels, she does successfully present women in traditional helping roles that are empowering. In the next two novels I will be discussing, written much later than the previous three, Beresford-Howe presents her female characters in more contemporary settings. Willy Doyle in A Population of One (1977) in particular inhabits a world changed by feminism, and the novel reflects this enlightened view of women's traditional and untraditional roles. In a complex fictional analysis of women's roles, Beresford-Howe presents Willy as both the traditional sister/aunt helping figure and the untraditional career woman. (My analysis will focus on Willy's first, and most important role.) In Prospero's Daughter (1988), Nan Weston plays the more traditional helping female role I have been examining, while her half-sister, Paulina, represents the untraditional, liberated woman. Again, my main concern is with examining Nan's role.

The heroine of A Population of One (1977), Wilhelmina (Willy) Doyle plays a helping role in relation to several of the novel's characters, including her mother, her sister Lou, her nephew Dougie, and her colleague Molly. Consistently, Willie is shown to relate best to children or child-like people, and to

demonstrate understanding of them. Willy's role as helper is never simple, but always problematic. This complex presentation reflects Beresford-Howe's awareness of women's increased options outside of their traditional roles. In fact, Willy is also an untraditional figure in that she is a university English professor as well as a nurturer. But Beresford-Howe's treatment of Willy's traditional role is more serious and interesting, and indicates Beresford-Howe's desire to privilege the caregiver's role as one capable of enhancing Willy's sense of self and feelings of worth.

Willy is first presented as a helper and protector of her own mother. Unlike her sister, Willy did not leave home to pursue marriage or a career, because she felt bound to care for and protect her mother from her alcoholic and abusive father. After her father's death, Willy remained at home caring for her aging and demanding mother. Willy comments:

No, I couldn't leave my mother, then or ever. And except for some bitter intervals in my teens, I never resented that. They owed me no explanations or apologies, after all, did they? There were no wrongs or rights, or none that I could judge. I stayed to the end, without protest. They both loved me and in a not too friendly world, that mattered a lot. Above all, she needed me. At the end, in her frailty, her hands shrunk little, she was my child. That mattered most of all. (70)

In this passage, Willy betrays her lack of self-confidence and her uncertainty over her motives for remaining to care for her mother. She must cling to the belief that she was needed, not because this role empowered her, but because the alternatives

were too frightening to imagine. While this helping role was her most genuine and sustained one, it was also threatening to her sense of self because it upset the usual balance between the roles of mother and daughter.<sup>3</sup> So while her mother made her feel needed, she did not transfer to Willy any of the strengths that result from caregiving--such as the ability to love, to feel and encourage others to express feelings, to share, and to nurture. Instead, protecting her mother was connected to Willy's self-repression of feelings, emotions, and experiences, a repression that her mother supported and encouraged. Repeatedly in the novel Willy refers to her mother's "frigid dignity" (54), her meanness (59), her "lady-like" coldness (40, 45), her scolding of Willy's indiscretions (87, 118). Willy then acknowledges how similar she is to her mother in her own prudery (124).

Willy's ability to draw benefits from the role of caregiver is hampered by the complex web of emotions she feels for her mother: love, anger, resentment, fear, and guilt. This caregiving role, as we have seen in other Beresford-Howe novels, has the potential to empower women. In Willy's case, however, she learns to repress her own needs while serving this role, thus ensuring that helping her mother will be self-effacing rather than self-enhancing. She also is unable to give fully of her self because she is dependent on her mother to make her feel needed. She must learn to separate caregiving from her feelings of dependency upon and guilt over her mother's victimization, and to reclaim this role as one that nurtures the self as well as the other. Only her

mother's death and Willy's attempts to nurture others allow her to move away from her guilt and neediness.

Also characterized by dependency and guilt, the sisterly relations of Willy and Lou are both a source of vexation and a source of love and potential connectedness. This contradictory presentation of their relationship testifies to Beresford-Howe's growing appreciation of the complex ties that bind women--and sisters, both literal and figurative--together. Willy's earliest memory of Lou is a happy one, although tinged with self-deprecation:

After Lou was born, I was allowed to hold her for the photographer to take our picture, and again that feeling of perfect joy and tenderness filled me. In fact, I was so blissful when they put the warm, shawled lump in my arms that I got a violent attack of hiccups, and Lou had to be photographed propped on a cushion after all. I must have been just five then. The whole episode was a neat little forecast of my whole life, in a way. (69)

From that point on, the sisters' relationship grows thorny and problematic, though their love for one another remains. Willy's self-deprecating tone in the preceding passage is one that recurs whenever she is thinking about Lou, and is indicative of the collected resentment, jealousy, and admiration she feels for her younger sister. Willy's attachment to Lou is again made evident in the following passage where she remembers Lou being sent to boarding school: "At eleven, Lou was pretty and already wore clothes with an air; suddenly boys she pretended to ignore began to hang about the porch, punching each other lightly and having long, pointless arguments. To [Lou's] delight, Mother packed her

off to boarding-school, ignoring my blubbered tears" (69), and offered to send Willy too; but Willy does not want to leave her mother.

Willy longs to have a closer relationship with her sister, a longing left over from her childhood. Much of Willy's resentment of Lou results from the different ways in which their mother treated them: "With Lou [Mother] could chat like another girl, but they would often fall silent when I joined them. It hurt; it made me feel not only inadequate but guilty" (68). Willy's guilt, now that her mother is dead, is acted out in her relationship with Lou (17, 164). Willy refuses to confide in her sister because of Lou's demonstrated lack of support at crucial moments. For instance, when Willy is offered her professorial job at Cartier College in Montreal, she alters her appearance, in an effort to look more up-to-date. Lou offers no support at all, but only criticism of the changes Willy has made. Willy, lacking self-confidence, begins to have doubts about her new look: "Maybe Lou was right about my new Afro-style permanent. 'You don't look like yourself,' she complained, and was cross when I said 'Good'" (8). Similarly, Lou fails to support Willy in her decision to buy a new car, in her fears about starting a new job, and in her loneliness while spending Christmas alone (17, 16, 65).

As the novel progresses, Willy builds up greater resistance to Lou's attempts to make her feel guilty. In fact, Willy becomes increasingly critical of Lou and her complaining, although she never goes so far as to confront her. By the end of the novel,

however, Willy "brav[es] all Lou's squawks and hisses of protest" (200) and purchases for herself the twelve-room Victorian home that she and Archie planned to buy together before his death. Willy also finds her sister to be deficient as a caregiver; while Lou is a less-than-eager expecting mother, Willy is unlikely ever to have children. Not surprisingly, Willy cannot sympathize with Lou's complaining about the baby she is expecting. And as a parent, Lou should be more attentive to Dougie, Willy feels, especially in one scene where he is hospitalized for a tonsillectomy (100-101).

Beresford-Howe demonstrates her ambivalence for the possibility of sorority between Willy and Lou. Although Willy has the opportunity to act the important roles of sister, helper, and caregiver in her relationship with Lou, her need for connectedness is only superficially met by contact with her sister. Repeatedly, Willy acts as Lou's helper, but when she seeks reciprocal emotional support from Lou, she does not receive it. The ultimate failure of mutual caring is perhaps best illustrated by Willy's handling of her engagement to Archie. Because of the difference in their ages and of the sudden and surprising recognition of their compatibility, Archie suggests that they keep their engagement a secret until the end of term. Willy is relieved not to have to share her news with Lou (187). Even after Archie's sudden death, Willy does not tell Lou about her love for Archie. Keeping this experience a secret--an experience so essential to Willy's emotional security,

independence, and growth--points up Willy's lack of confidence in Lou's support, and suggests the limited possibilities for Willy to find fulfilment in her sisterly relations with Lou.

In contrast, Willy's nurturing feelings for her young nephew --and for all the children she encounters in the novel--serve to characterize her as a helping figure. Dougie seems to be the only character in the novel to whom Willy feels able to relate unproblematically; their relationship is loving and caring, uncomplicated by the feelings of guilt, resentment, and fear that cripple Willy's other relationships, including that with her sister. She is recurringly thinking of Dougie, making little gestures that show she cares about him (24, 62, 141). In fact, Willy delights in all the children she encounters. At Emma's dinner party later in the novel, Emma's three-year-old daughter evokes great admiration in Willy, who says 'hi' to her as the little girl squats beneath the kitchen table eating from a box of Ritz crackers: "She has nothing more to say, and no interest whatever in my boring presence. I look at her with admiration. Is she what I will be, with luck - or, poor bitch, am I what she will become?" (182). Willy admires the child's lack of pretence, and identifies with her and other children because she is essentially a caring person, a helper concerned with the welfare of others.

Despite the complex web of feelings that entangles Willy and Lou, Willy acts as her sister's helper at the end of the novel. Willy returns to Toronto to fill the classic nurturing role: she

will take care of Dougie while Lou is in the hospital with her new baby (199). Having become more independent and self-sufficient, enriched by her experiences in Montreal and by her brief but fulfilling relationship with Archie, Willy promises herself that she will depend on no one, not even Dougie, the only person from whom she receives unconditional love. She realizes that Dougie will someday grow up and lead his own life and that she, as a spinster aunt, cannot hold him responsible for her welfare or emotional well-being: "I intend to ask for nothing and clutch at nobody, not even Dougie" (201). Willy has come to recognize that she gains more by helping others than by depending on them.

Willy also acts as helper to Molly, her colleague, comforting Molly in her moments of need and weakness, although Willy's kindness is anything but reciprocated. Through Molly, Beresford-Howe brings into confrontation two very complex characterizations of women who are both dependent and capable. Molly, a fellow professor in the English Department at Cartier College, seeks Willy's advice and confidence several times in A Population of One. Although Molly is an active feminist, she tends to have superficial and competitive relationships with other women, and her relationship with Willy is no exception. At the same time that she competes with Willy for fellow colleague Bill's attention and Archie's affection, she depends on Willy to meet some of the emotional needs that her boyfriend, Harry Innis, cannot. The first time Molly seeks Willy's support occurs when

Molly confides in Willy that she is pregnant and Willy congratulates her enthusiastically (84). But when Willy learns that Molly plans to have an abortion (her second one), Willy is shocked by this disclosure, and her initial excitement disappears as Molly explains how easy and quick the whole procedure will be: "'Nothing to it. A few hours in bed. The vacuum method'" (86). When Willy does not know how to respond, Molly "adds tartly, 'Don't tell me you disapprove. A woman has rights over her own body. There can't be any woman left who doesn't agree to that'" (86). Willy responds with great ambivalence, pointing out "'But this is somebody else's body, isn't it?'" (86).

Contrary to what other critics have written, Beresford-Howe is not advancing here an anti-abortion position;<sup>4</sup> she is presenting the dilemma with delicacy and appropriate ambivalence. She offers both sides of the issue, and leaves the question of which character is "right" completely open. Because both characters are presented by Beresford-Howe in complex and ambivalent ways, the reader does not necessarily sympathize with Willy, and Molly's position on abortion seems equally plausible. When Willy's words affect Molly, twisting her pale face "into a grimace of tears," Willy can't bear it: "I scramble over to put my arms around her and rock her gently, rubbing her narrow back as I would comfort Dougie" (86-87). Here Willy has slipped easily into the role of comforter and protector, as she often does with Molly. Molly appears very child-like in this scene; nonetheless, she is not presented one-dimensionally. In many instances, she is

characterized as a competent professional woman, eliciting awkward Willy's admiration. At other times, her child-like qualities are emphasized, and it is in these scenes that Willy can best relate to Molly and serve the role of helper.

While Molly is described as petite, attractive, and sometimes even doll-like, both Willy and the reader recognize that Molly is not the innocent she appears to be; only in her moments of weakness does she lean on Willy for emotional support. She turns to Willy for help at one other crucial moment in the novel, when Harry is thrown in jail for organizing and staging a student/teacher demonstration at the College. For the first time, Molly is not described as doll-like; instead, she has had all her hair cut off and is wearing a man's shirt and trousers. Molly is slightly drunk and shares with Willy some self-revealing knowledge that enables Willy to gain greater insight into Molly and her situation. Willy falls easily into her helping role when she learns that Molly's mother "'cancelled herself with a lot of sleeping pills'" when Molly was fourteen (131). She offers to help Molly with the bail money to get Harry released from jail. At this offer, "[Molly's] hand slides across the sofa and slips into mine. It is a cold, small hand, with frail little bones, and it grips as if it wanted help, though exactly what it is asking for is difficult to say" (131). Willy discovers that "some of [Molly's] tension seems to have transferred itself to me, and everything I touch rattles and clatters" (131). Here Willy acts as Molly's support, physically easing Molly's burden by taking

some of it upon herself. Willy notices how fragile and needy Molly looks: "The newly exposed nape of her white neck looks tender and vulnerable. I would like to touch it" (132). As Molly becomes increasingly intoxicated, Willy waters down her drinks and offers to drive her home. She has to help Molly get into her overclothes, so helpless is the usually self-sufficient woman (132). In the end, Molly does not accept Willy's offer of money, and Willy reflects: "Why it should hurt...would be hard to explain. And it's even harder to know the reason why" (135). This passage points up the lack of true communication between Willy and Molly, although Willy acts as emotional support when Molly needs her. Willy characterizes herself as acting the gentleman's part of rescuer with Molly (133), but in fact she is repeatedly playing the primary female role of caregiver. And Molly's manly appearance in this scene serves more truly to underline Willy's female role as emotional support and helper.

The final sister/mother figure I will examine is Nan Weston in Prospero's Daughter (1988). One of the novel's female protagonists, Nan is half-sister to the narrator, Paulina (Polly) Weston. Nan's sister/mother role is empowering because it is through caregiving that she is able to define herself in relation to her ego-centric father, famous novelist Montague (Monty) Weston. Furthermore, it is as Polly's helper and substitute mother that Nan is able to develop a caring and nurturing relationship with her sister and carve out her own identity. Her qualities as Earth mother and nurturer give her the dignity and

the strength to leave her oppressive family situation. Nan, we learn by the fourth page of the novel, is an exceptional woman, or, as her father says, "'a special case. And retardation may be the kindest word for it'" (4). Her family has never been able to find out exactly what is wrong with Nan, except that she has a very low IQ.

As soon as we are introduced to Nan, we recognize her as a helping, sisterly figure. Nan's role at Seven Oaks, her father's home, is that of housekeeper and chef (5). As well, she emerges as a mother substitute for Polly, which is Polly's earliest memory of her:

'You know the first thing in the world I can remember is her kindness. I was just learning to walk - you remember that polished parquetry floor in the London house - it looked as wide as an ocean to me. I was staggering along when it jumped up and banged me on the forehead, and Nan picked me up and just held me in a big warm hug till I stopped howling. She couldn't have been more than about eight herself.' (21)

This scene provides a nice parallel to Polly's current state of having to learn to walk again without crutches after the car accident, and her close contact with Nan at this time. Early on in the novel, Polly makes the following observation:

My present mental and physical state seemed to bring me closer to [Nan] than we had ever been before. What could the future hold for two people so impaired, I wondered. Were we vulnerable or invulnerable, being so without desires or ambitions of any kind; so without any will to impose our identity on anyone or anything? (25)

In this passage, Polly is attempting to map out the commonalities

between herself and Nan, although she implicitly acknowledges that her present state of dependence brings her closer to Nan, and especially closer to her role as child and Nan's as mother substitute. Specifically, they are reverting to their old mother-child pattern, in which Polly needs to be taken care of, and Nan becomes the more capable, the more helpful, the wiser. Polly's observation of their lack of will is accurate. As Monty's daughters, they have been taught to be imposed upon, rather than to impose themselves. Polly is wrong, however, in saying that she and Nan are without desires; instead, Polly makes this rationalization to avoid feeling guilty over Nan's manipulation by her father.

In fact, the novel's title, Prospero's Daughter, is a clever play on the relative importance of Polly and Nan (and their separate needs and desires) both as their father's daughters and as characters in the novel. The title reflects the growing significance of Nan as a character and as a person in her own right. When the novel begins, we assume that Polly is the daughter of the title, especially because Nan is "not a very interesting person" in herself (4), as Polly characterizes her at the novel's outset. But the focus shifts from an exploration of Polly, the undomesticated career woman, to a celebration of Nan, the caregiver, and an examination of the complex relationship she and Polly develop. The title highlights both the similarities and contrasts between "Prospero's" (Monty's) two daughters, and draws attention to their relationship as a formative and rewarding one.

At the same time that Nan acts as a mother figure to Polly, their relationship is made complex by the fact that Polly also tries to act as helper to Nan. Nan's resistance to these efforts is quite child-like, while Polly's dependence on Nan for her physical needs and comfort is equally so. The complex interdependence and trust in their relationship is what makes it similar to a parent-child relation, except that in this case the roles are continually being reversed. Especially in the first half of the novel, Nan plays the mothering role. She attends to all the physical needs of her family, even, on one occasion, getting up "at four in the morning to make croissants on a marble slab in the kitchen" (23). Nan's cooking is described as "a sort of love offering" (126). When Monty is confined to bed with gout, Nan prepares a delicious midnight snack of steak and salad for Polly and Monty. In this scene, Nan plays the traditional mother role, preparing food for and watching fondly over her brood: "Nan stood by, hands in the patch pockets of her gown, gazing at us kindly" (64). This scene depicts one of the rare moments where Monty shows affection for his daughters, while capturing the great intimacy and love between Polly and Nan (see also 8, 44, 62, 132).

Even Nan's appearance casts her as a motherly figure; she is described as an Earth-mother type, with her natural good looks and her calm demeanour, as Polly observes when she sees Nan again after four years:

Always a big woman, she had expanded a little in girth since I last saw her. Everything else about her, though, was pleasingly familiar, down to her shining, rosy skin and childishly straight fair hair caught back with an elastic band in an untidy knot. She had welcomed me at the door with one of her big, warm embraces, but we made a strangely ill-assorted pair of sisters standing there on the smooth grass, she so large and silent, I small, dark, and restlessly chatty. (8)

Polly habitually describes Nan as her antithesis in appearance and temperament:

I had almost forgotten how rare it was for Nan to volunteer any remark at all; now, for the first time, I felt a little self-conscious about my own tendency to verbalize everything. Just the same, it was her silence that more than anything else marked Nan as an oddity. When she did speak, it was always slowly. Her movements too were slow, and her calm, blunt-featured face was habitually without expression, except for her slow, lovely smile, and the way her light-blue, very clear eyes sometimes dwelt on things or people as if they saw more, not less, than everyone else. (8)

Polly's observations about Nan's seeming ability to understand without words is supported throughout the novel; because of her marginal position of being silent and largely ignored, Nan is able to observe others carefully, and to go unnoticed.<sup>5</sup>

In keeping with her role as Earth mother, Nan seems to possess a keener sense of communion with the natural world around her than any other character in the novel. Many instances occur in which Nan communes with nature, and they suggest Nan's innocence, purity, and oneness with the natural world (12, 91, 166). Such a scene is described by Polly, who decides one evening to join Nan for a walk in the garden:

A feeling of rare and quite irrelevant happiness suddenly visited me....Nan stood beside me now in her crumpled white cotton dress, looking up with me [at the golden clouds in the sky]. I glanced at her silent, lifted face. The wind fluttered her untidy fair hair. Something about her stillness or her silence for a moment gave me the absurd fancy that this stream of golden seraphim had materialized for her alone, or even that she had created it out of some alchemy of her own. A moment later, of course, it was only a fading sunset, and half an hour after that, Nan was serving sole veronique and slipping off to eat in the kitchen as usual. (25)

This passage emphasizes not only Nan's magical connectedness to nature (so much so that Polly imagines she is the magician who created this wonder), but also underlines what appears to Polly to be the contrast between Nan's wondrous state in nature and her role as cook and household helper in the inside realm of her father's house. In fact, Nan's domestic pursuits, such as cooking, spinning wool, weaving, and knitting also suggest her affinity with the organic order of nature, as do her valuable roles as caregiver and helper. Polly does not fully appreciate Nan until she realizes the extent to which such pursuits define and empower Nan.

Beresford-Howe carefully undercuts Polly's lack of respect for Nan's talents. When Polly is housebound recovering from a twisted ankle, Nan tries to teach her to knit, but Polly is predictably hopeless at such a pursuit:

Nan tried to help me pass the time while my ankle healed by teaching me to knit, but I was not a good student. The needles in my hands might as well have been chopsticks for all the help they were in my attempt to make a scarf. Time after time her patient fingers put the work right, but, left to get on with it by myself, I soon got into fearful complications, once even knitting the scarf to the sweater I was wearing. Crossly I cut myself free with wide snaps of the scissors. (165)

Polly's impatience with knitting serves as counterpoint to Nan's patient fingers; the description of Polly's incompetence highlights Nan's own competence at such domestic pursuits and constitutes a positive valuation of Nan's special abilities. Polly's inability to master the intricacies of knitting also suggests her resistance to the connectedness that it represents, in contrast to Nan's embracing of these creative and connective arts and her communion with the natural world.

Nan's communion with nature stands in contrast to her social awkwardness. When Nan does not join the other family members to share the lovely meal she has prepared, Polly asks Hamish, her father's long-time secretary and researcher, why Nan does not join them. Hamish answers: "'It's been like this ever since you - I mean for a long time. You know Nan. She prefers it this way'" (16). While it is true that Nan prefers to avoid contact with other people, what Hamish almost says about Nan's behaviour changing since Polly left the house suggests that in some way Polly's presence was good for Nan, in that it protected Nan from their father's ego-centrism and allowed her the opportunity to interact and connect with her sister. We see numerous examples of how Nan is powerless to refuse her father's exploitation of her (28). At the same time, however, Beresford-Howe implies that Polly's presence may be equally oppressive to Nan. Polly notices after her first meal at Seven Oaks that "Nan's outstanding talent as a cook had evidently flowered in my absence" (15). This observation implies that there is something negative about

Polly's presence, and the novel proceeds to illustrate this negative aspect. Although Polly and Nan develop a closeness that they never shared before Polly's return, Nan's complete trust of Polly, and Polly's failure to protect that trust, make Nan's discovery of the financial payoff her father has promised Ralph if he marries Nan a betrayal by Polly as well as by Monty, and brings about Nan's subsequent disappearance. Thus Beresford-Howe is able to present an extremely complex set of dynamics between the two sisters.

Polly's role in relation to Nan begins to reverse itself with the hatching of Monty's plans to find a husband for Nan. The irony of Monty's belief that he is taking care of Nan, when she does all the cooking, cleaning, and shopping, is evident. Monty assigns Polly the task of making Nan look presentable to potential suitors. Nan is not the only daughter being manipulated in this arrangement; Polly is also her father's pawn, although, unlike Nan, she has the wherewithal to refuse. Regardless, she complies with her father's ill-fated wishes. She takes on the motherly role of improving child-like Nan's slovenly appearance: "Swiftly pinning and tucking, I tidied her up while she stood, head bowed obediently, like a large child bullied by a small parent" (35). The unnaturalness of their reversed roles does not escape Polly's sense of the absurd. In this plan, she emerges as a kind of dark helper, however, doing more harm than good with her concern for Nan. Monty encourages this reversal of roles, telling Polly, "'that's what [Nan has] been lacking, [the

influence of another woman, a mother]. Your influence and all that could make her more - more normal. After that it should be quite easy to get her married'" (54). Polly is tempted to play this role to Nan (54); she is truly becoming her father's daughter. In a flash of insight, it occurs to Polly "that not Nan but I was the daughter he was seeking to manipulate" (55). But she feels too bound up with guilt and her sense of duty to refuse her father's request. Too late, Polly realizes that her father has taught her to use Nan's love and trust to manipulate her.

But Nan repeatedly resists Polly's attempts to shape her into something she is not (44, 69), not only resisting Polly's attempts to improve her appearance, but doing so in such a way as to make Polly feel the younger, less mature person in their relationship. Nan is unconsciously trying to maintain the role of mother and caregiver that Polly is threatening by her offers to help Nan look more attractive. When Polly unwisely asks Nan if she ever thinks about sex, she only embarrasses herself:

[Nan] lifted her head...and met my eyes so directly that I couldn't go on. My curiosity embarrassed not her, but me. What applied to all those I so glibly called 'everybody' might well have no relevance to her. Indeed, it didn't even apply to me any more. Quite possibly Nan had no need at all to think about such things as sex. And perhaps she was right: they were not meant to be thought about. In any case, it was clear she needed no instruction or advice from me, of all people. (91)

Nan again succeeds in maintaining her empowering role as substitute mother and helper.

Nan falls into the role of child in this strange parent-

child relationship with Polly only in connection with her uncertainty about Ralph, and she succumbs to Polly's mothering when she is confused about his sexual advances. It is at this moment, when Nan most needs Polly to be honest and forthright with her, that Polly seriously betrays Nan's trust. Polly becomes angry and advises Nan to gratify her desires (182-183). She later regrets speaking to Nan in anger, having forgotten that Nan does not know how to interpret her words any way but literally. By giving her this advice, Polly contributes to her father's ill-fated attempt to match Ralph and Nan. Nan's reversion to a subordinate role is made clear in the scene where she comes into Polly's room before dinner: "With a glance at me she took up a bottle of my perfume and timidly dabbed a little on her palms and the base of her throat as she had seen me do. She tipped her left hand childishly to and fro to catch the light with her little engagement ring, as if bewitched by the new identity it gave her" (198). Here Nan is characterized as a shy and frivolous little girl trying on her "mother's" perfume. The engagement ring does not give her identity; on the contrary, it detracts from her specialness and normalizes her. Polly comments on this aspect of Nan's physical transformation when Nan and Ralph announce their engagement to the family:

[Nan] was wearing her blue suit with its white blouse [that Polly had picked out for her at her father's request], and her hair had been cut very short and curled close. These things made her look unfamiliar and also quite strikingly attractive, though not with the innocent, unkempt sort of beauty she had before. In fact, the unfamiliar thing about her was that now she looked almost exactly like anyone else.

And yet her fresh, natural self could still be found in her rosy face and shyly lowered head. She leaned against Ralph as trustingly as a child. (193)

Polly takes on a genuine helping role only once, when Nan becomes ill (146). Monty and Polly don't want to send Nan to the hospital because she has never been away from home before. Instead they take turns sitting by her bedside tending to her. Polly's concern for Nan, and her own guilt, keep her close by Nan throughout her illness. When Nan's fever finally breaks, Polly "knew there was no real need to sit up with her now - not on her part. But there was on mine. I wanted to be near her, just to look at the calmly sleeping face and listen to her easy breathing" (148). Thus as soon as Polly's role as caregiver is no longer necessary, she reverts back to her emotional dependence upon Nan: "Nan slept deeply, quietly on, and I envied her" (148). She seeks closeness with her sister to escape her own emotional poverty.

Nonetheless, Polly is the only character in the novel who demonstrates a growing appreciation of Nan's qualities. Defending Nan against her father, she says: "'She's happy, and she makes other people comfortable. What more can you want from her?'" (53). In this description, Polly shows how Nan's nurturing and caring qualities provide her with both value and status as a person. Polly is the only one who considers Nan's wishes seriously; when her father elaborates his plan for securing a husband for Nan, Polly asks: "'what if she doesn't want to marry?'" (53). Monty replies: "'She will want what I want for

her'" (53). Unfortunately, Polly does not have the courage to challenge her father further. When Monty's hopes that Dr. Bagshot will propose to Nan are dashed when instead he proposes to an unwilling Polly, only Polly thinks of Nan. As Monty laughs at the ridiculousness of the situation, Polly "couldn't laugh with him, because I was thinking about Nan. How could this ever possibly be explained to her? It never could be, of course, and there was nothing really funny about the implications of that" (103). Polly also considers Nan's welfare first; Polly thinks, "it could be that Nan's had a lucky escape" from a miserable little man (102). As her relationship with Nan deepens, in fact, Polly is shown to consider Nan and her qualities as a matter of course.

Ultimately, Polly fails in her potential role as Nan's helper and protector, because, given the opportunity, she does not intervene to protect Nan's interests. Polly only realizes her failure to serve this valuable role after Nan has disappeared, having been told by Lally, Ralph's long-time companion, that Monty has "bought" Ralph's affection for Nan. Polly is overcome with guilt at not having interfered with Monty's plans for Nan. Hamish sets off to search the neighbourhood and surrounding woods for Nan, agreeing to let Polly accompany him because, he remarks, Nan trusts Polly. The irony of this statement is not lost on Polly, and she finally understands how gravely she has betrayed Nan's trust and "that [she] would never see Nan again" (250). Although this realization makes her sad, Polly feels she can preserve a sense of communion with the sister she has grown to

respect and love. She dreams that Nan is living in a hut in the woods, and is comforted by that vision (250). Polly's strong feelings of connection to Nan convince her that her sister has disappeared forever: "there was no rational way I could explain even to myself why I knew this with such painful certainty about Nan, no matter how hard I tried to believe she was still somewhere - elsewhere - perhaps everywhere" (253). Here, in absence, Nan truly becomes the Earth-mother figure, nurturer to the world, and Polly acknowledges that Nan's mystical and transcendent qualities grow out of her traditional nurturing role.

This chapter has sought to describe and elucidate the role of the sister/helper figure and to show Beresford-Howe's ambivalence towards the potential for women's self-realization in this role. In the following chapter, I turn my attention to the mother figure as she is portrayed in Beresford-Howe's fiction. There, I will concentrate less on describing this role than on demonstrating how Beresford-Howe's portrayal of this role combines views of mothering both as it is constructed in patriarchal society and as it is reformulated by feminists. Ultimately, she seeks to redefine the role of mother by integrating feminist and traditional views of the nature of motherhood and the work of mothering.

Notes to Chapter 2

- 1 Angela Miles celebrates the traditional sororal qualities that characterize the integrative feminine impulse, and quotes Ehrenreich and English to convey her conviction that " 'the human values that women were assigned to preserve [must] become the organizing principles of society. The vision that is implicit in feminism [is] a society organized around human needs....There are no human alternatives....And the "womanly" values of community and caring must rise to the center as the only human principles' " (Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts Advice to Women (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979) in Angela Miles, "The Integrative Feminine Principle in North American Feminism: Value Basis for a New Feminism", Women's Studies International Quarterly IV, 4, 1981: 491). In The Mother Knot (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), Jane Lazarre celebrates more personally those qualities of caring as they forge connections between women: "There is a kind of doubt which must be respected for its own sake, a sort of question which does not have an answer but which is answered by long discussions about one's feelings, moving deeper and deeper into one's heart, uncovering all sorts of material. Somehow you end by feeling better. You are more clearly understood, you are slowly turning in the direction of change. Often these discussions, so common among women, touch upon something which is apparently unrelated but is the very secret that needed sharing, the one that was pressing so painfully and so invisibly upon your sadness. And although once the connection is exposed it all seems a fortunate accident, that is not the case. Rather, it is the process of quiet, loving, insistent identification, the repeated testifying of one to the other that says, I am the same as you - that unlocks the doors and unravels the tangles" (120).
- 2 The marriage law, in 1949, governing a husband's rights over his wife's property, are summarized in the novel: "First of all, [the wife] can't enter into any legal transactions without her husband's written consent, and unless she gets a marriage contract before marriage, half of all her money automatically belongs to her husband" (The Invisible Gate 202).
- 3 This reversal of the daughter's role in the mother's old age is the subject of several lengthy studies and cannot be addressed here in its entirety. See, for instance, Lucy Rose Fischer, Linked Lives: Adult Daughters and Their Mothers (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) and Vivien Nice, Mothers and Daughters: The Distortion of A Relationship (London: MacMillan, 1982).

- 4 Andrea O'Reilly (72) accuses Beresford-Howe of adopting an anti-abortion position in A Population of One, drawing her interpretation from the same passage I have been discussing.
- 5 Monty routinely ignores Nan when he invites others to go into town, or for a walk, or wherever. He assumes she'll stay home and attend to their bodily comforts, like preparing dinner, making beds, etc. For instance, he invites Polly to take a drive into town with him, but apparently the invitation is not open to Nan, who "did not appear to hear the question" as she gazes out the window. As he and Polly are leaving, Monty calls out to Nan: "'We'll be back in time for tea, Nan. Make some of those nice scones'" (18).

### *Chapter Three*

#### *Myths of Motherhood: Beresford-Howe's Challenge to the Social Construction of Mothering*

Constance Beresford-Howe's vision of motherhood is an eclectic blend indeed: she draws upon patriarchal, radical feminist, and maternal feminist theories of mothering to propose her own vision. Motherhood to Beresford-Howe is neither entirely the socially constructed role of an all-giving, always patient and loving woman who is willing to sacrifice her self to give autonomy to her children nor the trap that some militant feminists reject altogether.<sup>1</sup> As such, she offers an integrative feminist position--and ultimately an ambivalent view of motherhood. In her depiction of mothers, Beresford-Howe rejects such myths of mothering as the polarization between the "good" and "bad" mother; the myth that the mother is solely responsible for maintaining the integrity of the family; the myth that mother is to blame for all of the children's problems; the myths of motherly self-sacrifice (and female masochism); and of natural, motherly instinct. It is not surprising, therefore, that Beresford-Howe's mothers, taken as a whole, exhibit a remarkable

and realistic ambivalence towards their role: Avys Winter's motherhood in My Lady Greensleeves is a source both of sustenance and of oppression; Eva Carroll in The Book of Eve finds in her relationship with her son a complex, ever-changing web of love and exasperation; Night Studies's heroine, Imogen Hughes, is uncertain how to define herself--if at all--in relation to her sons. In The Unreasoning Heart, Beresford-Howe depicts the ambivalence in the mother-daughter relationship from the child's point of view. Abbey Bain struggles to understand her complex and different relationships with two mothers, her dead mother Cynthia, and her mother substitute, Fran Archer.

The Unreasoning Heart (1946), Beresford-Howe's first novel, depicts the mother-child relationship primarily from the child's point of view. Not surprisingly, given that Beresford-Howe was a young student when this novel was published, it remains her least complex presentation of motherhood. Clichés of mother-daughter relationships abound, ranging from competitive feelings between mother and daughter for the affection of the men in the family, to self-sacrificing acts on the daughter's part when the mother suffers some life-threatening illness. In spite of these clichés, Beresford-Howe captures the reader's interest in these relationships mostly through her engaging portrayal of the daughter, Abbey Bain. Abbey's ambivalent feelings for the two mothers who care for her constitute further examples of Beresford-Howe's ability to integrate several positions on motherhood and mother-daughter relations.

Abbey's relationship with her first and biological mother, Cynthia Bain, is highly charged with feelings of intense love, shame, and anger. The intense love comes from Abbey's feeling of attachment to the woman who gave birth to her and cared for her when she was a child. The shame and anger come from feeling abandoned by a mother who was too lonely and broken down after her father's death to take adequate care of Abbey. Melodrama aside, the following vignettes of Cynthia's life help to explain why Abbey harbours such confused feelings for her mother.

According to Fran, Cynthia's one-time closest friend and confidante, Abbey's mother was a sweet, good, but impetuous woman, who entered into marriage with a man she loved passionately, but who was fated to bring her misery (6). While intensely happy at first, soon "they had terrible, passionate fights; they hated like animals. But still they tried and tried again to live together. She'd go back to him and pretty soon there'd be another awful scene and he'd leave her again....They separated before Abbey - the baby - was a year old....[Abbey] must have had a dreary life of it, kept in school all these years, with never a decent home" (6-7).

After Abbey's father is killed in an accident, Cynthia is devastated, and she begins to drink. After Cynthia's death, Abbey remembers "her mother as she had last seen her, sitting on the edge of the bed, laughing hysterically, too drunk to get her shoes off. Then there was the Mother Superior's face [in the convent where Abbey's mother had sent her to live], and her dry

voice saying, 'Your mother is with God.' The picture faded, and then there was Mrs. Archer's voice over the telephone - faded and queer, like a voice from another world" (13-14). Here Beresford-Howe is setting against one another all of Abbey's various mother figures: her real mother, who abandoned her to the Mother Superior (a nice play on words, because it raises the question of what kind of mother is "superior") when she couldn't cope with her own life, let alone her daughter's; and Fran Archer, who appears at first to Abbey as the generous and beneficent mother who rescues her from her misery. But the novel proceeds to show that the polarities set up in the preceding passage are false: no mother is either all bad or all good. Mixed with Abbey's feelings of shame and even hatred for what Cynthia did--and did not do--for her, are feelings of connection, empathy, and love. Similarly, Fran is shown to be both a loving and generous mother, as well as a domineering and controlling mother who suffocates her favourite son by living through and for him, rather than letting him follow his own path.

In fact, Beresford-Howe often brings together the bad/good polarities suggested by Abbey's two mothers by setting up an ironic juxtaposition between Fran's stories about Cynthia and Abbey's own memories. For instance, when Abbey first comes to live with Fran, Fran welcomes her warmly and expresses pity for Abbey for the neglect she suffered. She tells Abbey:

'You know, of course, that your poor mother was terribly unhappy in her marriage. Her life was so uncertain - she chose it that way, but I'll never understand why. She was miserable.'

'Yes,' said Abbey mechanically, and all at once, she saw her mother again on that rainy afternoon before she left for France to be with her husband. She had come to the school and sent to the classroom for Abbey. When she saw her mother then, she hardly recognized her. She was glowing and radiant with happiness; her eyes shone with a marvellous brightness.

'Darling, I've come to say good-by for a little while; your father and I - well, we've come together again. I'm joining him in France. Afterwards, maybe, we'll send for you, dear. Be a good girl - I'll write ' and suddenly, she had taken Abbey by the shoulders and looked directly into her eyes. The memory of the moment was so strong that Abbey could hear the rain whispering against the window again, see her mother's shining eyes and feel again that strange belief that, if she looked long enough into those eyes, she would discover a secret, intolerably beautiful and full of pain.

(20-21)

The conflicting versions of Cynthia's existence--and the confusing reality that she was sometimes miserable and sometimes happy--point to the lack of absolutes and certainties in her role as a mother and in her life as a woman.

Similarly, Beresford-Howe suggests that Cynthia, even when devastated by her husband's death and unable to care for her daughter, was still deeply concerned about Abbey and her welfare. She sent her to school in the convent, where Abbey might find the security and stability that Cynthia could not provide. She gave up her daughter and died alone in order to spare Abbey greater hurt than she already suffered. Abbey remembers

her mother as she was when they said good-by in the cabin of the boat taking her back to France for the last time. She was a stranger: gaunt, haggard, with sunken eyes and thrust-out cheek-bones. Her face had had the same listless agony seen in the faces of the starving. For months, with her flushed cheeks and rolling, drunken laughter, she had been frighteningly remote. Abbey remembered, with shame, that she used to avoid her mother; even hated her. She had not cried when they told her her mother was dead. She had felt

nothing. Her mother was the grotesquely painted woman dancing with the glass in her hand. Beside her, the woman with the shining, happy eyes was a dream and Abbey could never realize that the two were one woman. (23-24)

Regardless of whether Abbey ever realizes it or not, Beresford-Howe's insight that Abbey's mother is both of these women illustrates her belief that motherhood cannot be narrowly defined by the socially constructed view of "good" mother and "bad" mother.<sup>2</sup> Each mother is a complex, multi-faceted, and imperfect woman, an individual who is neither exclusively good nor exclusively bad, but who embodies elements of both, and toward whom a child can feel both love and hate without threat to the mother's role or identity.

Although at first Abbey feels that in Fran she has found the "good" mother who can replace her "bad" mother, the novel traces her discovery of Fran's complex identity as a mother. Fran literally welcomes sixteen-year-old Abbey to the Archer home with outstretched arms: Abbey "was received in a copious embrace. She was exquisitely embarrassed, but the warmth of Fran's welcome moved her so that she threw her long arms around the older woman and hugged her. Fran was genuinely touched. 'You dear little soul!' she exclaimed. 'Poor, lonely little creature! Never mind, you're at home now.' Abbey had a terrible urge to cry and in her struggle to control it, did not notice that Fran was dabbing at her own eyes" (17-18). But as the final sentence anticipates, relations between the two women soon show that they are temperamentally at odds with one another. Fran feels threatened

by Abbey's silent, insightful observations of the Archer family; similarly, she wonders at the closeness between Abbey and her eldest son, Con, with whom she does not get along. Conversely, Abbey does not understand why Fran plays favourites, babying her youngest son, David, and bullying Abbey's beloved Con. Fran's suspicious and jealous nature often sets her against Abbey's reserved and serious one. When David tries to escape his mother's destructive influence, and Abbey accidentally discovers David's whereabouts but promises David she will not tell Fran where to find him, the struggle between the wills of Fran and Abbey intensifies to the point that Fran closes herself off to Abbey. Abbey, equally stubborn and bound by her feelings of loyalty and concern for David, as well as by a strong belief in the rightness of his desire to escape from the mother who is stunting his maturation, will not give in to Fran, regardless of her need for her substitute mother's love and support. When the episode finally ends with David committing suicide as the only way to escape from his mother's oppressive influence, Abbey must confront the fact that Fran, like Cynthia, is not the perfect mother.

At the same time, though, Abbey assumes care of Fran, who suffers a severe nervous breakdown with her son's death. In this caregiver role Abbey becomes more accepting of Fran, learning to see her as the imperfect--but loving and still worthy of love--woman she is. Perhaps Beresford-Howe is positing that by taking on the mothering role, Abbey is able to appreciate that being a

mother is not synonymous with being simply "good" or "bad". Instead, Abbey learns to accept that mothering is a role that each individual woman approaches as an individual; mothering does not transform a woman with strengths and weaknesses into one distinct "mothering" personality--either good or bad. Mothers are simply individual women who have taken on the role of caring for their children, or others. In Feminist Counselling in Action, Jocelyn Chaplin defines "mothering" as "a particular kind of relating which can exist between lovers, friends, colleagues as well as between parent and child," and not as recurring patterns of "'holding', 'letting go', and 'non-judgemental acceptance' - terms [that] relate to the idea of what 'good' mothering is about in our society" (in Nice, 145-6).<sup>3</sup> In this broad definition of mothering, Abbey becomes a mother to Fran as she recovers from her illness: Abbey nurtures, cares for, empathizes with, and offers support to Fran, thereby discovering her own potential to mother, in spite of her personal imperfections and limitations. Thus can she appreciate Fran's and Cynthia's mothering capabilities, despite their shortcomings, and view the mother role as an extension of a woman's identity rather than as a basis for defining the achievement of or the failure to achieve selfhood.

The preceding chapter showed the significance of the caregiver role in empowering the women of My Lady Greensleeves (1955), where Pier's sister Elynor is central to the plot and to the emotional survival of Avys Winter in her role as

sister/helper. Similarly, Avys' role as mother to her two daughters is of central importance in the novel, in the sense that it both sustains and oppresses Avys in relation to her husband Piers and to her own happiness and sense of self. Although Avys does not define herself solely in terms of her motherhood, her two daughters, Katherine and Griselda, bring her great joy in an otherwise austere existence. However, she is willing to risk losing the security of her family in order to meet her own needs for love by having an affair with her attractive cousin, Hal Brandon. This affair is related to her strong attachment to her eldest daughter Kate; when she first becomes involved with Hal, Kate is being courted by Hal's young protégé and nephew, Fabyan. It is not insignificant that Avys was being courted by her cousin Hal when she was about the same age as her thirteen-year-old daughter, but that she ended up being swept off her feet and marrying another man, Piers Winter. By the time her daughter is old enough to think about marrying, though, the passion between Avys and Piers has all but disappeared (at least on Avys's part). At the same time that her marriage is flagging, her unconsummated relationship with Hal is brought before her again, and this time she seizes the opportunity to explore what might have been. Her hopes for a happy marriage for her daughter are closely linked to her own need for love and desire for Hal.

The social construction of motherhood urges us to condemn Avys' affair as destructive to her family and to her relationship

with her children.<sup>4</sup> The novel, however, does not perpetuate this conventional view of motherhood. Avys's feelings for her two daughters remain protective, committed, and nurturing. The angry husband, Piers, is presented as coming between the mother and her children in his unreasonable separation of Avys from the girls when he discovers that she has been unfaithful to him. The mother, then, is not an inherently "bad" mother even when she cheats on her husband. She is not rejecting her children or preferring her needs over their own; hers is a rejection of a brutal and demanding husband whom she no longer feels compelled to satisfy. In a complex view of mothering that rejects the polarities between "good" and "bad", Beresford-Howe presents us with a "good" mother who sometimes does morally "bad" things.

Similarly, Beresford-Howe's portrayal of Kate's feelings of confusion in her half-understanding of her mother and father's relationship does not judge and condemn Avys; it merely questions the reality of a woman who can be both a mother who loves her children and a wife who has stopped loving her husband. Kate, like many young women growing up in a patriarchal society, has trouble distinguishing between the roles of mother and wife, let alone seeing Avys as a woman apart from either of these roles. She worries that in loving another man, her mother has jeopardized her love for her daughters. It is in fact Piers who comes to this conclusion and whose actions impose this interpretation of events on Kate. Beresford-Howe is able to suggest that Kate's view of the situation is too limited for her

to judge her mother, and by dissociation presents a sympathetic view of Avys. The brief stream-of-consciousness passage in which we are privy to Kate's thoughts as she is forced to pack up and leave her mother and her home, highlights her feelings of confusion, betrayal, and loss (100-102). Beresford-Howe makes it clear that what Kate blames on her mother's adultery (the breakup of the family, the need for Kate and Griselda to be sent away from Avys) is really Piers' fault; it is his rash actions, rather than Avys's agonized decision to pursue her relationship with Hal that separate the girls from their mother. Beresford-Howe is able to illustrate the child's need both to empathize with and to blame her mother for her suffering. Through Kate's narration of events, we understand to what extent Piers is orchestrating the separation and directly causing the mother and children to suffer for circumstances that have no relation to the daughters at all.

Beresford-Howe's presentation of Avys is decidedly sympathetic. Her fictional return to the sixteenth-century in My Lady Greensleeves shows women being victimized by a patriarchal society: specifically, a woman in a profoundly unhappy marriage who takes responsibility for her happiness and seeks fulfilment of her desires, and who is punished by the might of patriarchy in the most cruel way imaginable to her--by separating her from her children and knowledge of their safety and happiness. As in The Unreasoning Heart, here the bifurcation of "good" and "bad" mothering is rejected, but My Lady Greensleeves goes even further, by offering a critique of a patriarchal system in which

mothers and children are mutually punished if either transgresses the patriarchal order in which women obey their husbands and daughters obey their fathers, even when the "crime" is not related to the woman's mothering ability, but is, as in this novel, a separate issue between husband and wife.

Thus in My Lady Greensleeves is mothering in patriarchal society presented as both a source of sustenance and of oppression. Throughout her separation from her daughters, Avys sustains herself with the memory of their love and closeness; at the same time, Piers is able to exploit and oppress his wife and daughters because of this connectedness. He also believes that because mother and daughters are close, Avys, through contact with them, will "taint" his daughters with her loose morality. The dominant man in a patriarchal society can use this bond to oppress the subordinate woman and child, and can make burdensome this connection by denying or thwarting it.

Beresford-Howe leaves the novel's relevant issues necessarily unresolved, given Piers' demonstrated manipulation and oppression of his family. The reader must believe that Piers is "a man greatly changed" (210) if we are to find any hope in the novel's resolution, where Avys goes back to Piers and is reunited with her daughter, Kate. Beresford-Howe was either unable or unwilling to deal with how Avys could ever forgive Piers for sending six-year-old Griselda to live in the harshest conditions, under which she dies. Beresford-Howe characterizes Avys' pain at the discovery of Grizell's death in terms of birth

imagery. It is almost as if Avys is forced to feel deeply again after so many months of repressing her emotions. But then she seems to accept her own suffering, and to find strength in her ability to survive it. She then confronts the greatest challenge to her self-survival by seeking out and reconciling with Piers:

She had known before now the dumb agony of losing a child; but never before had a loss given her this anguished, tearing pain, shocking in its intensity. It filled her with blind feeling, leaving no room for thought. Like one newly born she breathed, gasping, the potent air and contracted her eyes in the strong light of the sun, now pouring warmth through the windows. The first shock diminished gradually. From a hidden center of vitality strength and courage began to infuse her, growing till it reached a kind of painful ecstasy. Without hesitation she began to descend the stairs. Aye, she thought, it was drink thy wine with joy [Piers' motto] - She moved swiftly across the hall, looking this way and that for him, her heart swinging like the heavy clapper of a silent bell. (214)

The strange mixture of Avys' purported elation, "strength and courage", and the funereal images of heaviness, pain, and silence in this passage is distressing and suggests Beresford-Howe's inability to reconcile Avys' need for independence and selfhood and her stated need for "love and comfort" (217). Here she seems to be capitulating to the false theory of female masochism in relation to men: that women find strength in suffering in a patriarchal society, that women learn to accept the limitations (and blame, and shame) imposed upon them in the roles that men define for them, that women actually find strength in being dominated.<sup>5</sup> In a typically patriarchal view of mothering, Avys consciously blames Grizell's death on her affair with Hal (214), as if she is responsible for, and had necessarily brought on by

her actions, Piers' decision to send them away. Intellectual resignation and emotional vitality remain uneasy companions in this novel's resolution.

In The Book of Eve (1973), Eva Carroll, like Avys Winter, is made to feel that leaving her husband, Burt, threatens her role as a mother and her relationship with her child, namely her thirty-eight-year-old son, Neil. Again, responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the family is forced upon the woman, as much as she assumes it herself. Beresford-Howe manages to hold in tension Eva's desire to carve out her own identity and the socially ingrained notion that she belongs in her role as wife-mother. In this way, she seeks to integrate in Eva the feminist impulse to escape the limits imposed on women in patriarchy, and the socially imposed guilt that women suffer when they seek to redefine these roles. On the one hand, Eva's unacceptable existence is placed before us in all its ugliness, as she elucidates in a letter to God:

'I'd like to make it clear that I ran away not just from the servitude of nursing Burt, running the house, shopping and cleaning up, and all that drab routine. Nor from the confinement, even, though that was bad.... But one of my few pleasures, especially in the years after Neil's marriage, was browsing through antique shops, where I discovered treasures like my spinet desk, a Lismer drawing, and a Belleek tea-set - all such bargains even Burt couldn't complain much. But in the last few years, he made such a misery every time I wanted to go out for a few hours on these hunts that finally I had to give them up altogether. And because that one little private pleasure was cut off, I festered with resentment.' (15)

On the other hand, Eva suffers guilt over wanting to have an

identity of her own, because that is one need which the social construction of mothering seeks to dismiss (Rossiter 279). Eva asks God: "Do You realize, I wonder, what submerged identities women like me can have? How repressed and suppressed we are by a life that can give us no kind of self-expression? Unless You are really female after all, as the Women's Lib girls insist, even You can't know what it's like to be invisible for years on end" (16). Eva vacillates between feeling that she has struck out to discover her identity, and feeling that she has left it behind, asking herself with some impatience, "how could you leave all that, not to mention your status as respectable wife, mother, and grandmother? Even your identity you've left behind like rubbish" (17). Eva's struggle is for power and control over her own experience; this is her goal in redefining her motherhood. She sums up the powerlessness she felt in her former roles, and the ambivalence with which she rejects them: "As for marriage, what can one say too devastating about its awful proximities and involvements? (And rewards, of course.) Or motherhood with its boring, exhausting servitude? (And even better rewards?) The whole thing is just servitude to some enormous machine. And now I'm free" (63).

The passage in which Eva describes her son Neil's birth is telling of the extent to which power has been denied her in her various roles:

Never knew what pain was, even, till Neil was born. And even then, what I hated most was the feeling that in so important a business as giving birth I had actually so little to

contribute. The pains began when they decided to (in the middle of a Mary Pickford movie), they accelerated and intensified at their own pace, and muscles pushed the child out into the world without consulting him at all, or me much. Like his conception, all (or nearly all) decided by and controlled by some process outside the will; and I resented that, because aren't we entitled, after all this business of evolution, to a share of the responsibility? Lying there, rhythmically assaulted by pain, I felt like a means to an end, while the doctor, cheerfully lighting a cigarette, gossiped to Burt about the stock market. Of course, eventually I was only too pleased to be chloroformed right out of the whole thing. But I resented even more having no vote in the matter a couple of years later when I miscarried, and with blood and tears life was taken away instead of given. (33)

However disguised as a general complaint about the injustice of the universe or God, this veiled attack on patriarchy gets right to the heart of the issue of women's powerlessness and alienation from their own bodies.<sup>6</sup> The image of the woman labouring to give birth, feeling divorced from the physical sensations of her own body, set in contrast to the doctor and husband disengaged from her experience, perfectly captures the reality that women are "a means to an end" in patriarchal society.

This disguised attack on patriarchy finds a more concrete target when Eva recounts with bitterness her memories of trying to have more children. She blames her first miscarriage on "the mess and fatigue of moving" into Burt's prized house in the suburbs, and, by extension, on Burt (138). After "two more disappointments not to be blamed on the house, ...I developed a kidney condition in another pregnancy, and the doctor advised an abortion" (138). Eva resists the idea, but is finally persuaded by the doctor's reasoning: "'Now look, there [sic] a high risk;

if you come to term with this one you may lose your own life. After all, you have one child, Eva, and he needs you. Talk it over with your husband, of course, but - I'm sending you along to the specialist, but I know what he'll say. The thing to do is come into hospital and I'll tie off your tubes'" (138-139). The reader can sense in Eva's account of Burt's less than complete empathy for or attention to her plight that she blames him for not caring about her feelings: "Burt, grimly worried that winter and struggling with a series of carbuncles as well as a pay-cut urged me to take the doctor's advice, and I finally did" (139). Once again the doctor and the husband combine through detached male expertise and indifference to wrest from the woman control of her own body.

Beresford-Howe understands the way in which not only Eva's husband and Neil blame Eva for threatening the stability of the nuclear family, but how Eva feels guilty and blames herself. In Beresford-Howe's portrayal of Eva's mixed feelings when she sees that her husband is managing without her, we see the complex double bind that holds women fast in the bonds of patriarchy.<sup>7</sup> Eva has so internalised the notion that she, as mother and wife, is responsible for meeting the needs of others, that she does not know whether to feel liberated or angry by Burt's ability to get on well without her (albeit with another woman filling her shoes). When Eva sees the transformation that the presence of Burt's new housekeeper, Mrs. Pratt, has made in her house, she is overcome with ambivalence:

The house looked absolutely different. No, of course not absolutely; but different enough to open my eyes round in surprise. New curtain on the front door - ecru lace, if you please. My plants all gone from the bay window. Dog-prints on the snowy path. Well, I jogged on past, not daring to slow down enough to take in any more. No wish to encounter the housekeeper, dainty Mrs. Pratt, coming in or out with her - my - shopping basket....

...I had no intention of going back there. Truly had not the slightest wish to see Burt again. Just the same, I couldn't seem to get that damned housekeeper out of my head. Did she put enough salt on his morning porridge? Fold half the foot of his socks inside so he could get them on without help? And what had the bitch done with my plants? The thought of them pitched into some garbage can made me feel hot with resentment. (138)

Similarly, when Neil tells her of the dramatic improvement in Burt's condition recently, Eva silently struggles with her feelings, not knowing whether to feel insulted, indifferent, or relieved (167-168). Her deeply ingrained belief that it is her duty to be the good wife and mother, combined with the evidence provided here that she has failed in her duty, creates Eva's sense of frustration and guilt. At the same time, the action of leaving Burt indicates her rejection of this martyr role which Mrs. Pratt is now successfully filling. In fact, Eva is angry with herself for feeling ambivalent--sometimes guilty, sometimes joyful--about her decision to leave the stereotypical role of wife and mother behind. She tells Neil: "'I'm not sore at anybody. Not Burt, or you; certainly not Mrs. Pratt, or even the dog. Of course I should have kept in touch with you more. I'm a bit sore at myself, that's all'" (169).

Nonetheless, Beresford-Howe succeeds in discrediting this myth of holding the mother responsible for the survival of the

family, by showing the development of a stronger and more honest relationship between Eva and her son, one that was not possible while she suffered beneath the burden of caring for her invalid husband. In her letter to God, she characterizes her relations with the two men in her life as follows: "No one knew me. Burt, who saw me every day, least of all. Neil, who rarely saw me, had cares of his own, including four children, so he had to avoid recognizing what he knew of me. And there was no one else" (16).

One of the most positive changes between Eva and her son is Eva's relinquishing of responsibility for Neil's life. From the start, as is evidenced in the passage above in which she describes Neil's birth, Eva associates Neil with her own powerlessness and essential alienation from her body; thus he too becomes a victim, and she somehow responsible for his victimization, having brought him into the world, however helplessly. Until she forces change in her relationship with Neil by controlling their communication, Eva is stuck in a pattern of self-blame in relation to Neil. When thinking of her family, she notes, "And there's Neil, who never asked to be born to us, or to be the only one between parents like millstones" (26). When Eva refuses--rightly--to take responsibility for the series of miscarriages that ensured Neil would be an only child, she can stop viewing Neil as a victim and stop blaming herself for his lonely life and his difficulties with his father.

Eva also succumbs to--until she liberates herself from--the myth that mothers can love their children too much, and thereby

stifle them, make them too dependent, too soft (Caplan 113ff; Rich 197). This is how she characterizes Neil: "My dear son, my Neil and his kind heart with its rare flashes of insight and clumsy tact. He was the enemy, not Burt; with his sweetness and reason he was the real threat. All his life I'd fought against loving Neil too much, and that was all that helped me now" (29). Eva must come to the recognition that simply loving her son is not a threat to her or to him; what does constitute a threat is mother-child love not being grounded in any mutual appreciation and acceptance of each other's individuality. Only when Eva can distance herself from her roles, and make choices about her own life, can she recognize that Neil too is responsible for his own choices.

Ironically, Eva's departure not only improves her relationship with her son while enabling her to achieve a sense of self and self-esteem, but it also improves Burt's life. Eva, of course, does not fail to appreciate the irony and the implications for her own freedom behind this turn of events. She comes to understand that her role as wife-mother is actually two roles, and that she has the ability and the choice (if she makes it) to define each of these roles to meet her own needs, rather than to live in abeyance to how these roles are defined in a patriarchal society to serve men's needs. Only through taking control of her relations with her son is she able to make him see that she is an individual, not simply a woman defined by her various, unwelcome roles. It is her refusal, despite feeling

guilty, to give in to Neil's pressure to return and fill the role she has always filled, that forces Neil to see his mother in a new light and gives a greater depth and sincerity to their relationship.

Eva is able to redefine her relationship with her son so that it meets her needs: to offer love, to nurture and protect, to belong and to have irrefutable ties with another human being, to communicate, and to be seen as an individual. While Neil blames Eva at first, seeing her desertion of her husband as a rejection of her identity not only as wife but also as mother, he eventually comes to see her as a complete and worthy human being. In a conversation towards the end of the novel, Neil apologizes to his mother for not recognizing her needs sooner (168). He understands Eva's need for autonomy and respect, as well as for love and connection, only after she repeatedly insists on it. Neil learns to see his mother for herself, telling her: "'The fact is, Mum, I've admired you more since you up and left than I ever did before. Once I got over my moral outrage, that is. You shook me up plenty. Ever since then I've felt different about quite a lot of things....I see it was impossible [for you to live that way]. I mean, I saw it finally. I don't blame you...Not any more'" (188). And likewise it is their mutual ability to recognize that their bond as mother and child is being maintained--even strengthened--despite her rejection of her former suffocating role as wife and caregiver, that enables Eva to understand that her role as mother is neither defined nor

threatened by her role as wife, but that she has the ability to define this--and any other of her potential roles--for herself.

In fact, by the end of the novel she is ready to let herself appear human--and fallible--to her son. Women who become mothers are under pressure from societal expectations to aspire to the ideal of "good" mother--one who is superhuman in her unconditional love, self-sacrifice, moral virtue, and so on (Rossiter 279).<sup>8</sup> The mutual recognition by Neil and Eva that she is an individual, and that this self can exist in harmony with being a mother, frees Eva and her son to accept that she is human, and less than perfect. In their final conversation, Neil gives Eva what she calls "bad advice", when he asks her why try to be pure and uninvolved, "'why bother? Why not do what you like?'" (189). And Eva responds: "'I wonder if you're right. What does it matter, really, if I can't live up to it, as long as I know what's right...'" (190). Even though Neil is not exactly sure to what she is referring, the reader recognizes that Eva is now beginning to come to terms with and redefine the role of "wife" as it applies to her relationship with her lover, Johnny--what it used to mean when she was married to Burt, and what it could mean if she redefined it with a view to having her own needs met.

What is finally so unconventional about The Book of Eve is the honesty with which Beresford-Howe shows Eva grappling with her various roles. Beresford-Howe depicts Eva experiencing the full range of emotions in relation to her family. She is not

simply the angry wife, the self-blaming mother, or the devoted mother-wife; she is all of these and more. As we have seen in Eva's relations with Neil, she goes through moments when she blames herself for his life, when she blames him for her life, when she pities him, loathes him, loves him, scorns him, protects him, and finally, accepts him.<sup>9</sup>

In Night Studies (1985), the female protagonist, Imogen Hughes, undergoes a similar struggle to come to terms with her feelings of ambivalence about motherhood. Single mother of two teenage sons, for Imogen the real and ongoing battle to have fulfilling and meaningful relationships with her sons is a source of stress and worry that is never far from her consciousness. When asked about her kids, "the pimply, grinning faces of Giles and Roger formed in her mind's eye and winked at her. Her lips softened a little. 'You mean my sons? They fight continually. With each other most of the time. With me in the intervals. Sure, they're fine. Perfectly ghastly to live with, but that's quite normal, everyone tells me'" (12). This passage points up Imogen's denial and distrust of her needs and of her own assessment of her relationship with her sons. Even though she's worried about them, and particularly about thirteen-year-old Roger's recent habit of carrying a knife, she's been told that their "ghastly" behaviour is normal. She also seeks advice from Tyler, a fellow teacher with a fifteen-year-old son in a private boarding school, about whether private school might be the answer to Roger's problems, having no faith in her own ability to deal with Roger (101).

Imogen's relentless cynicism and lack of confidence make her relationship with her sons even more difficult for her to understand. She does not know whether to blame herself for her family troubles, or her ex-husband Alec, or some indeterminate force that shapes the universe. She adopts a brusque demeanour to deal with the tough subject of her boys, in order to protect herself from becoming too "soft" with them. Here she succumbs to the myth of idealized motherhood, which discourages women from making their children too dependent on them, particularly if they are boys.<sup>10</sup> But Imogen embodies a strange mixture of emotions--tough love, pride, self-blame and defeat, extreme worry and concern. She tries to keep all these contradictory feelings in balance, and it is no wonder that she must feign indifference toward and distance from her sons in order to deal with them at all. When Imogen, who is worried enough about Roger to sacrifice her own security in retirement to send him to private school, proposes the possibility to Roger, her suggestion is greeted with derision from both her sons (122). The need for Imogen to put distance between herself and her two sons in order to protect her own weak sense of self is clear.

Like Eva Carroll and Avys Winter, Imogen blames herself for not being able to keep her nuclear family together, even though her ex-husband Alec is the one who left the marriage to live with their best friend, Guy, his gay lover. She chastises herself for her "unbelievable stupidity never to have suspected the truth about [Alec] all those years" (11). She also feels guilty for

thinking about it so often, for not getting over it. She is caught in a trap of self-blame and guilt:

As if thinking about it, she told herself, picking at the scabs like this, did anybody a damn bit of good. You'd think after four years the whole thing would have stopped mattering that much, wouldn't you? Instead of that it scrambled through the cage of her head like a rat on a treadmill, round and round; always in motion, but never arriving anywhere. (56)

She feels that she and her sons have been victimized, and until she can overcome these feelings of powerlessness and loss of control, she cannot relinquish responsibility for her sons' behaviour and feelings. Imogen recalls how once she did assert her own power, when she "conceived Roger on purpose, without mentioning it to Alec" (203). But this momentary seizing of control has turned into a trap: Roger is now her biggest headache, a budding juvenile delinquent. She feels trapped not only because he is a problem, but because she loves him nonetheless, "maddening though he is, with those blue eyes..." (202). Until she surrenders part of the responsibility for her son's lives to them, she will continue to see her sons and herself mutually entrapping one another:

Why am I in such a flaming hurry to get home? The kids will look at me with variations of his face. They will be watching some filthy violence on the box and there'll be a battle to get them to bed. The day's mail will all be bills. After I run a wash through the machine, a stiff double Scotch will help me off to sleep. The best part of the day, by far.

Then, sharp at five, worry-time comes round again. When that's taken care of, we can get up and pack school lunches. Get the quarrelling, argumentative, money-asking brats off to school. Go round the apartment with the vac. Visit the

supermarket, the bank, the cleaner's. Make a dentist's appointment for Giles. Correct essays. At five, feed brats again. Five-thirty brings round the daily argument with Roger about that sheath-knife he insists on carrying.  
(56-57)

But mutual entrapment, seen from another perspective, is also mutual protection; worried she'll "wind up in a locked ward" with all her obsessive thinking about Alec, Imogen wonders, "And what would happen to the kids then?" (158). Imogen, as an intelligent and self-conscious woman, bears the burden of being able to see her relations with her sons from too many perspectives.

As a result, she struggles to reconcile feelings of love and protectiveness with feelings of guilt and resentment. When her sons spend their first weekend with their father after their parents' separation, Imogen is unable to deal with the conflicting emotions she experiences:

Not that it wasn't bliss, in a way, to be free of them for a bit. But that empty, silent apartment, the litter of clothes and model planes in their room - somehow nothing helped me get ready for the anticlimax of that. What a vacuum in time and space. It illustrated what my whole existence had come to. Quite terrifying. So right after the kids were picked up, I opened the Scotch and began to sink it....By Sunday night the whole quart was gone. When the kids came in I could hardly stand up. I'm not a noisy or a dirty drunk, but Giles knew. That look he gave me. The bitter contempt of his silence. No, I'm damn careful now about booze. Some kinds of painkillers just aren't worth it. (94-95).

How does a mother reconcile feeling hurt and betrayed by her children with loving them? How can she blame them and also blame herself? How can she both want to hurt them and want to protect them? In her fictional exploration of these maternal issues,

Beresford-Howe allows Imogen no easy answers.

Imogen also takes upon herself the responsibility for her sons' relationship with their father and the world, worrying that they are being poorly prepared and even damaged. She tells a colleague that her sons' visits to their dad are "'always a pain....Giles' insecurities always go straight to his gut, so for days ahead he turns pea-green without warning. And Roger for nights after has nightmares....I shall cry for joy when they turn twenty-one'" (95). Imogen well knows that her worry and protectiveness will not suddenly cease when her sons turn twenty-one, but saying so allows her to cope better with her overwhelming feelings of concern for them. She struggles to understand how they can suffer from these visits while knowing "how they look forward to those weekends with Alec, and how they chatter away about him afterward. They still adore him as much as he adores them, which is pretty rare in any relationship, specially parent-child ones" (95). She feels guilty also for her own double, contradictory impulses; on the one hand, she wants to protect Giles and Roger from the hurt Alec has caused them, from the hard lessons and ugliness of the world; on the other hand, she wants to assert her own rights and needs for them to understand her feelings of being betrayed by Alec. This assertion involves Imogen in presenting herself as a victim; while this is a form of justice and a way of absolving herself from blame in the breakup of her marriage, it also invites rejection by her sons, to which she responds by distancing.

Imogen's dilemma, identified by Adrienne Rich in Of Woman Born, plagues many enlightened women who have sons: how does the mother reconcile her negative feelings for men with her strong loving and protective feelings towards her sons? How does the mother communicate to her sons her anger at being victimized and oppressed in a man's world, when they will become part of that world? (Rich, Woman 205-211). Rich's answer is for the mother to allow her sons to confront the plight of women in patriarchal society, but to encourage them to see every woman (including their mother), as well as themselves, as individuals. Only then can the oppression of women begin to reverse itself, when mothers teach their sons to respect each person for himself or herself (Woman 216-217). In illustration of this dilemma, Imogen often betrays her feeling of difference--as a woman--from her sons. When Tyler asks her if Giles and Roger will worry that she's late getting home, she responds: "Giles might, but I doubt it. He only worries about global problems like nuclear war. If the storm is still doing its thing, the two of them will probably be up on the roof trying their best to get struck by lightning. Boys are strange animals. Always half in love with disaster" (183). Over the course of the novel, Imogen moves toward the recognition that each individual is worth getting to know, that superficial judgments of people simply do not begin to explain what lies beneath the surface. Beresford-Howe communicates this conviction in Night Studies through her patient but relentless exposure of each character as an individual with important secrets, thoughts,

and feelings of his or her own, and particularly in the discovery of interest between Imogen and Tyler. This illumination of the person beneath the facade or the role applies, by extension, to Imogen's relationship with her sons. Beresford-Howe suggests that if Imogen can see herself as a person worthy of respect, her sons will also see her as worthy of their love and admiration. She must believe herself, and communicate to them, that her life has been more than "torn off...pretty well in chaos. Except for looking after the boys. And once that's over -" (194). Only when she can value herself as more than the role she has played will she have a more honest relationship with her sons, based on mutual respect, not mutual entrapment.

In the next chapter I will continue to examine Beresford-Howe's portrayal and redefinition of women's roles in The Marriage Bed and A Serious Widow, particularly as these texts explore the myths of motherhood and wifedom that she interrogates, rejects, and re-integrates. Both these novels offer heroines who, in the exploration and redefinition of their roles as wives and mothers, redefine their sense of self.

Notes to Chapter 3

- 1 Rossiter explains that "the experience of mothering is socially constructed and...mothering practices in our culture are not 'natural and normal', but are socially organized through the needs of capitalist patriarchy" (209).
- 2 The pervasive myth of "good" and "bad" mothering is discussed by many feminist critics, among them Amy Rossiter, Jane Lazarre, and Adrienne Rich. In her book Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), Paula Caplan devotes one chapter to "The Perfect Mother Myths" and another chapter to "The Bad Mother Myths".
- 3 Jocelyn Chaplin, Feminist Counselling in Action (London: Sage, 1988).
- 4 Caplan, for instance, writes of the extremely high expectations placed on mothers in our society, not least among them the duty of "monitoring the family dynamics" (97). See also pages 96-97, 100.
- 5 See Paula Caplan, The Myth of Women's Masochism (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1985).
- 6 On the issue of women's alienation from their own bodies, especially in childbirth, see the chapter entitled "Alienated Labor" in Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York and London: Norton, 1976; 1986). Amy Rossiter also identifies the way in which women's alienation from their own bodies maintains their powerlessness as follows: "Such alienation...prevents women from using their bodies as a resource for creating meaning. Without this resource, there is no experience which motivates us to go past ideology, to search for patterns which could make our experiences coherent" (264). "What we are talking about here is the lack of capacity for resistance, since resistance requires some degree of trust of one's bodily senses. It depends on giving some validation to what is felt, heard, touched, or seen" (Rossiter 265).
- 7 Amy Rossiter describes the mother's dilemma in the following manner: "Mothers are invisible and inexpert; but, though they are powerless, they are at the same time responsible for all failures" (175).
- 8 Jane Lazarre characterizes the idealized "good" mother as follows: "She is quietly strong, selflessly giving, undemanding, unambitious; she is receptive and intelligent in only a moderate, concrete way; she is of even

temperament, almost always in control of her emotions. She loves her children completely and unambivalently" (viii).

- 9 Beresford-Howe's portrayal of Eva's relationship with her granddaughter is similarly honest: it can best be described as ambivalent. "Lovely Kim at fourteen with her long nut-brown hair and shy eyes (and silly dog's name, the mother's trendy choice, of course)" (23) becomes, after a chance encounter in which Kim feels visibly awkward with, and contemptuous of, Eva's new appearance and lifestyle, the "ignorant, arrogant little bitch....Kim would find another way to be as essentially frigid and phony as her mother. To think how sentimentally I used to love her made me squirm" (88). Over the course of the novel, Eva begins to reconcile these two extreme versions of her understanding of Kim into a view of their relationship that incorporates the good and the bad, and accepts both as characteristic of any important relationship.
- 10 Much has been written about how the ideal mother should encourage individuation and separation between mother and child, and about the ways in which less than ideal mothers fail in discouraging their children's dependency. Feminist critics have launched a counter-attack on this patriarchal and largely psychoanalytic perspective. Adrienne Rich devotes a chapter in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York and London: Norton, 1976; 1986) to exploring the issues of separation in the relationship between mothers and sons. Similarly, Paula Caplan identifies one of the myths of bad mothering in mother-daughter relationships as the "myth [that] mother-daughter closeness is unhealthy" (113).

## *Chapter Four*

### *Redefining Roles: Constance Beresford-Howe's Integrative Feminism*

Of all the heroines in Beresford-Howe's fiction, the two who come to terms most successfully with the roles of wife and mother are the two who struggle hardest to uncover their own personal identities: Anne Graham in The Marriage Bed and Rowena Hill in A Serious Widow. In doing so, they are able to redefine these roles to empower themselves as women and to meet their own needs. Unlike Eva Carroll in The Book of Eve, Anne and Rowena do not run away from their marriages; they are abandoned by their husbands, Anne for another woman, and Rowena through her husband's death. As a result, they are forced--and force themselves--to redefine their role as wife, unlike Eva, who mostly avoids dealing with this role. From their apparent victimization, both Anne and Rowena are forced to take responsibility for their own lives. It is this contradictory juxtaposition of weakness and strength, victimization and triumph, that best characterizes Beresford-Howe's mature vision of integrative feminism; the success of Anne and Rowena in defining for themselves, rather than simply rejecting their roles, is all the greater because they emerge

intact and empowered from their repressive experiences of marriage and motherhood.

Like the female protagonists examined in the previous chapter, Anne Graham and Rowena Hill are also ambivalent about mothering: Anne in The Marriage Bed vacillates between seeing herself as sometimes imprisoned and sometimes liberated by motherhood; Rowena Hill in A Serious Widow alternately agonizes over her guilt that she is not closer to her daughter and celebrates her emerging selfhood. Both heroines also show great ambivalence towards the role of wife: Anne's marriage is a morass of conflicting emotions, ranging from love, to gratitude, to resentment and anger, while Rowena feels repressed but prizes the economic security of her role. In both novels, Beresford-Howe relentlessly exposes the shortcomings for women in these traditional roles, as well as the benefits, and ultimately illustrates the successful redefinition of women's roles to satisfy their complex needs.

Like The Book of Eve, The Marriage Bed is a novel in which patriarchal, socially constructed views of mothering are balanced against feminist notions of women's freedom, choice, and fulfilment relating to motherhood.<sup>1</sup> In an interview in Quill & Quire, Beresford-Howe claims that she consciously set out in this novel to depict a woman who finds fulfilment in her own motherhood (Ryval 62); however, the confusion of the heroine's needs for self-fulfilment with women's needs as dictated by patriarchal society is a constant source of tension and insight.

That is, what Beresford-Howe presents as Anne Graham's needs for self-fulfilment and identity are sometimes socially imposed views of the roles women need in order to feel like self-fulfilled and productive members of patriarchal society.

The institution of motherhood is one such way that society makes women feel they are meeting their own needs while also meeting society's needs. In fact, many women have internalised this ideology to such an extent that they believe they are fulfilled simply by obeying society's behest to produce children, or they castigate themselves for not being "good enough" mothers because they do not feel fulfilled serving this function.<sup>2</sup> In Anne Graham, Beresford-Howe offers an illuminating view of one woman who chooses the role of mother and thereby meets some of her own needs; the gaps in Anne's self-fulfilment illuminate the extent to which the social construction of mothering has pervaded woman's consciousness and turned her upon herself as the object of guilt and anger.

Beresford-Howe's depiction of Anne's relations with other women in the novel also enables her to explore the social construction of mothering and to propose a redefinition. Through these varied relationships, Beresford-Howe exposes society's tendencies to blame mothers, to discourage support among mothers, to isolate the work of mothering, and to encourage feelings of passivity and weakness in women.<sup>3</sup> But these relations also illustrate the potential transformation of institutionalized motherhood: these various models of mothering, and alternatives

to mother work, embody her belief that each mother must find her own comfortable interaction with her children by being true to herself and her own needs.

The most striking unresolved tension in the novel is Anne's confusion of her own needs with patriarchal notions of women's needs. Beresford-Howe gives expression to this tension through the image of imprisonment. Despite the ostensible theme of freely chosen motherhood, the reader cannot ignore in The Marriage Bed the recurring image of motherhood as potential prison and trap; it is an image which the novel's heroine, Anne Graham, meditates upon intermittently. Similarly, the circumstances of Anne's becoming a mother and wife--an accidental pregnancy, a "shotgun wedding", followed in quick succession by two more unplanned pregnancies--hardly constitute an example of planned and freely chosen motherhood, at least biologically speaking. But that is precisely Beresford-Howe's point: the choice and desire to become a mother are not merely biologically based events and decisions. Becoming a mother is about being true to oneself as much as it is about responding to accidents and circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

In the opening pages of the novel, Anne speculates on the nature of her imprisonment. We first meet her waking from a dream in which

A prisoner sat fettered with heavy chains. It was my husband Ross, but his seat was the low rocking-chair where I nursed our children, and I felt the weight of those chains as if they bit into my own flesh....I was weeping, because we all knew that Ross, who had left me five months ago, was as free as a feather in the air. I was the prisoner loaded with chains, namely my two children, my current pregnancy, and my own temperament. (1)

Anne sees herself as doubly imprisoned, first in the peculiar prison of young motherhood, and second in "my failed marriage, . . . my stalled academic career" (3). When she feels "the kick of the fetus in [her] imprisoning belly" (2), the reader is made to understand the mutual imprisonment of mothers and children in our society: the belly imprisons the mother as much as it imprisons the fetus. But the belly as symbol of prison also suggests the positive qualities of such imprisonment: the mother's body protects, nurtures, and keeps alive the fetus within its prison.<sup>5</sup> Thus is Anne able to see her imprisonment within motherhood as both limiting and life-sustaining. The dream also suggests that she has believed her husband to be the prisoner, but she realizes with relief that he is free to leave, that she cannot stop him. She helps him pack, telling him, "'Why not? I'm not your jailer'" (171). In this realization, paradoxically, she finds freedom. She is freed from the mistaken belief that people cannot choose their lives; she realizes that she does not have the power--or the burden--to entrap anyone but herself. With this knowledge, she is free to take responsibility for and make her own choices.

In keeping with the depiction of motherhood as potential prison, Beresford-Howe enumerates the mundane aspects of Anne's existence as stay-at-home (and eight-months-pregnant) mother to two toddlers, three-year-old Martha and eighteen-month-old Hugh. With humour and compassion, Beresford-Howe describes through Anne's eyes the daily grind of caring for, feeding, dressing, undressing, diapering, amusing, and soothing young children. To

make matters even more challenging, Anne has to cope alone, her husband Ross having left her to live with his secretary and some other drifters to "find himself". It is almost as though Beresford-Howe has challenged herself to depict a young mother's lot as desirable even under the most difficult and torturous conditions.

In this, however, she mostly succeeds. Anne's is an engaging and believable narration. She is fully aware of the challenges that each day poses, but somehow manages to find strength and humour in surmounting her all too realistic problems. There are elements of pathos and frustration that permeate her narrative, but these struggles emerge as impossible expectations and limitations that have been imposed on Anne as a mother in patriarchal culture. However, Anne's self-directed liberation from the imprisonment of motherhood is problematic, particularly when she confuses meeting her own needs with society's expectations of the ways in which motherhood is designed to meet women's needs.

Out of the mouths of men come the tenets of institutionalized motherhood;<sup>6</sup> that is, men often express patriarchal societal beliefs about how women, children, and men are fulfilled by a woman's motherhood. For example, the Grahams's pediatrician, Jeff Reilly, confesses to Anne his disappointment that his wife, an active environmentalist and believer in zero population growth, has chosen not to have children; he believes that "without them you just go round in circles, polluted by your own

ego" (152). While Anne feels partly in her specific case that having children is one way of meeting the need to focus attention away from her self and to put her energies to some productive use, she realizes that having kids can also reinforce and bolster one's ego. This she discovers in relation to her own stepfather, Max, who confesses to her that she was one of the reasons he was attracted to her mother and to the idea of marrying her at the age of fifty-something. He tells Anne:

'...it was one of the big things in my life that I could send you to university, give you the chance you needed to be somebody really special. For me, right from the first, you were no kidding some kind of princess I found in the cinders. It meant a lot to me, with no kids of my own, to sort of rescue you....'

But the truth was sour in my mouth. It was an act of egoism, then, all his goodness to me; not really love?  
(207)

Children, then, can either diffuse or promote the parents' ego.

From her husband, Ross, Anne comes under pressure to embody the role of perfect mother. In the social construction of mothering, the work of mothers is naturally extended into the sphere of the home, that is, housework. In Right From the Start, Selma Greenberg questions the automatic linking of housework and the work of mothering: "Assuming that child rearing is a task that necessarily needs to be associated with another activity, there is certainly nothing normal and natural about the association of housework and child rearing" (103). Anne, despite knowing women who refuse to include housework as part of their mothering (including her own mother), bows to the pressure she feels to keep her house tidy as an adjunct to mothering. In one

scene, Anne expresses amused disgust at the way her neighbour, June, fails to keep her house clean; these descriptions are deliberately juxtaposed with a conversation between Anne and Ross about her "duty" to do housework. Anne describes June thus:

Among the many things she didn't believe in was housework in any of its many forms (slavery): so they lived in a morass of discarded copies of The Sun, choked ashtrays, empty tin cans, and a series of hamsters that kept disappearing into the walls. Whenever Ross grumbled about my casual housekeeping, I used to point out to him that at least our sink wasn't full of silverfish, nor did our sofa smell shrilly of pee like June's.

'Grand or petty larceny,' he sighed, rolling his blue eyes upward...

'Oh, do stop nagging.'

'Listen, in this kitchen you could do worse than latch onto the old line about "cleanliness is next to godliness.'

'Cleanliness is next to goddamn self-righteousness, if you ask me.' (34)

Unfortunately for Anne, though she argues with Ross about the level of cleanliness, she has internalised the belief that housework and mother work are inextricable; thus does her belief in her duty become a source of guilt when she cannot maintain the high standards to which she has obligated herself.

While she finds housework loathsome, she realizes that even it can be transformed into something worthwhile, if she can appreciate its hidden benefits:

Laundry devoured a large share of my daily time and energy. Sometimes I thought acceptance of this mechanical routine was the most significant and awful thing about my present life....But I didn't mind washing, really. I quite liked the primitive noise of the water, and the feel and smell of it. And then the piles of soft, fresh clothes that emerged at the end of the whole process were a modest accomplishment of sorts - clean deeds in a naughty world.

This underground room had the further advantage of

being some distance away from the kids and from life in general, but in touch with both....It was a kind of isolation cell that encouraged retrospection, even resignation of a sort... (74-75)

But Anne's attempt to reconcile herself to the housework is a constant battle. In one scene, for instance, she panics at how disorganized her house is (181-183). She objects to housework because it is a waste of her time; however, she knows it is expected of her and feels bound at least to try. Ultimately she achieves a kind of balance between Ross's expectations and her own willingness, finding benefits where she can.

Nonetheless, the issues of housework and mother work remain the major causes of the battles fought by Anne and Ross. Ross's perception of Anne's superior power and strength is an issue between them throughout the novel, and is related to Anne's fertility and mother work. Just after they discover she is pregnant, Anne recognizes the force of her own needs and worries about Ross's relative weakness: "I knew that if I really loved Ross, I would let him go, whatever the cost to myself. But I couldn't afford this kind of generosity. My need was too big. I could keep him safe - but who would protect him from me? That was a question too hard to answer then, or perhaps ever" (165). Most of their arguments arise because Ross feels overwhelmed by the sheer force of Anne's will. One fight occurs when they return from a two-week vacation, and Ross discovers wet, mouldy laundry in the dryer that Anne forgot to switch on before they left. He accuses Anne: "'It's absolutely, bloody TYPICAL! I've told you

again and again, but you never listen. This place is chaos! Your junk is all over the place - you're always making clothes in the kitchen or reading in the toilet, toys and pots and God knows what cluttering the stairs - it's disgusting! It makes me physically sick!" (137). Anne meekly apologizes, and thinks, "how like him it was to make such an uproar about a few sheets. Just the same, I began to suspect for the first time that the trivial conflicts between us might be the ones, in the end, to prove true destroyers" (137). Not only those conflicts but also Ross's expectations of Anne's perfect housekeeping and mother work threaten the power balance in their relationship. He tells her "again and again" how he wants the house kept, and explodes at her when it is not done to his satisfaction. She feels obligated to accept his standards, although she knows it is impossible for her to attain them.<sup>7</sup>

A related conflict occurs when Anne brings home a kitten for Ross as a birthday present: "'One more thing to be responsible for I do not need'" (99). Anne interprets this rejection of her gift as a personal affront, an unwillingness on her husband's part to consider her feelings or needs:

'What you mean is, you don't give a shit what I think or how I feel, right?'

'What I mean is,' he shouted, 'I'm fed up with you tanking over me as if I didn't exist. When do I ever get to vote around here? About anything? The mood takes you to paint the kitchen purple or adopt a dog, and I'm supposed to tag along. Mr. Yes Dear. Well, I'm not going to do it anymore. I warn you, I'm fed up. Dangerously fed up.' (99)

Here Ross tries to get the upper hand in the power struggle

between them by threatening retaliation if Anne does not curb her own will and bow to his. After this argument, from an impulse to repair the damage of what was said and to prevent Ross from carrying out his threat, Anne "scrubbed the kitchen floor with particular ferocity, wondering as I did so how much housewifely cleanliness came from the same source [of] bitter mutual resentment" (102-103). That day, with Ross having articulated his view that Anne is not doing her job well enough, Anne suddenly feels the burden of her roles: "The perpetual demands of the two babies struck me for the first time as monstrous. Outrageous. Colossal. I mouthed these and other words from time to time" (103).

Anne realizes that this power struggle is related to her overwhelming fertility. She tells their friend and doctor, Jeff, that "'This whole mess is my fault, basically. He never wanted all these pregnancies. I mean, three of them in three years. It's all been just too bloody much. He can't understand why I've been so totally incompetent, and then so stubborn. No wonder he felt overwhelmed. Threatened, even'" (150). Beresford-Howe's choice of words in this passage, including the word "bloody", points up a fear of women's fertility that Adrienne Rich discusses at length in Of Woman Born.<sup>8</sup> Rich asserts that men have always felt threatened by the fertility of the female body and its functions of menstruating and giving birth, and so have named these functions "dirty" and "taboo" (169). Anne views Ross's decision to leave her as an inability to deal with the power of her own

fertile body, and, by extension, her needs. She tells Jeff: "'I don't blame him....The whole scene has done bad things to him, and he's built up a big resentment. Even fear. He says I'm too powerful. I fill up the whole house, he says, with all my kids and plants and books and animals and junk, till there isn't enough air for him to breathe'" (151). The threat to Ross's own strength and power is expressed in terms of Anne filling up the whole house, the domain where the mother and wife is expected to make things comfortable for the rest of the family, and to forget her own desires and needs.<sup>9</sup> The expectations of Anne in her roles as wife and mother highlight the contradiction between the experience of these roles and the institutionalization of them.

Nevertheless, Anne's willingness to surrender her strength in fertility illustrates the power of the patriarchal construction of the passive mother. Anne betrays her own interests and needs as a mother and as a woman, and bows to societal expectations, when, strapped down in a powerless position on a stretcher after actively delivering her third child, she views her accomplishment as somehow happening in spite of her imprisonment: "Strapped down and helpless, I rose into the air like a bird [the stretcher was being lifted by two male paramedics]. What was wrong with being in chains? I was dizzy with happiness" (231). This view of herself seems unfounded, given the active role she has just played in giving birth to her own child (224-230). Contrast this last delivery to her description of Martha's birth:

My thoughts had jumped back to the last stage of my sixteen-hour labour with Martha, who had characteristically tried to arrive in the breech position. After an age with poor, pale Ross rubbing my back pain, they had to put me out so she could be turned. At the end, it took a whole medical team to get her out of there - nurses yawning wearily, the obstetrician sweating, Ross trembling as he coached me with the breathing. I was exhausted, battered with pain and high on several different kinds of dope. But when Ross lifted my head for the first look at that small, purple creature, its head swollen and bruised, its mouth open and furiously yelling, my whole life focused and became perfectly simple. I had one purpose: to keep that ugly, helpless human thing safe. (151-152)

Anne's account of her labour at Martha's birth is not a very tender one, but is rather an outsider's version, and probably a male's view; after all, she was "high" and probably heard the story from her husband or obstetrician. Although the pain of childbirth and its consequent dissociation of body and mind is common, in this account Anne unconsciously betrays a strong sense of alienation from her own body and the baby she has given birth to: "it", the "purple creature", the "human thing" comes "out of there", with its "head swollen and bruised" by the forceps, while the uncaring, "yawning" nurses, the uncharacteristically "sweating" doctor, and her incompetent, queasy husband manipulate and urge her on. She blames herself (the person in this scenario whose exhaustion is most legitimate) for being "exhausted".

Why is Anne, like Avys at the end of My Lady Greensleeves, so eager to relinquish her own strength and the centrality of her activity in the birthing process and in her role as mother to patriarchal society's view of the mother as helpless, weak, "prone and strapped down"?<sup>10</sup> And why does she feel the need to

revel in her own masochistic self-sacrifice? These issues are implicit in the novel, and yet Beresford-Howe offers no easy resolution. The novel simply stands as an emblem of the totality of Anne 's experience, and it is this experience that changes her attitude and enables her to give birth to a new self. Anne's recognition of her passivity is neither conscious nor immediate; instead, it occurs gradually but forcefully over the course of the novel.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the novel, nonetheless, we find Anne rejecting the weak and powerless stance characteristic of women in the social construction of mothering. In Of Woman Born, Adrienne Rich identifies this myth as that of the woman passively "waiting"-- the "female fate" of the mother and wife, "waiting to be asked, waiting for our menses, in fear lest they do or do not come, waiting for men to come home from wars, or from work, waiting for children to grow up, or for the birth of a new child, or for mmenopause" (39). But at the conclusion of The Marriage Bed, Anne is tired of waiting for Ross to find himself. She rejects the role of passive, suffering victim, and actively demands that he come home. In addition, she experiences this rejection of waiting as a physical sensation of power, suggesting that rejecting the passive role is linked to her alienation from her own body. Her refusal to wait is accompanied by an increase in physical, as well as emotional, strength:

As I stood out there in the street, I felt a sudden burst of such basic fury that my blood literally seemed to boil. I would not knock at that door and stand waiting for someone

to answer. Without stopping to think about it, I stooped awkwardly down, grasped as much sticky snow as I could pack into a ball, and hurled it at the lighted upstairs window. Hot and breathless, I barely waited for it to land on the pane with a loud and satisfying whack before launching another. And another. Both bull's eyes. Between grunts of satisfaction, I puffed obscenities into the night air. (218, my italics)

Thus does Anne succeed in getting Ross's attention. However, "at the sight of him close up, all the fierce, energetic anger suddenly died out of me and my legs felt light and weak" (219). Anne's physical states by the end of the novel begin to mirror her feelings of angry strength and power, on the one hand, and her neediness and dependence on Ross, on the other. Taken together, these emotional states reflect an increasingly balanced and whole person. Ross must confront, through Anne's insistence, the contradictions she embodies in her experience of these roles and in his expectations of what she should be. By the end of the novel, both Anne and Ross have compromised their polarized views of housework and mother work. Anne offers to try harder to keep the house tidy, while Ross concedes that "'It's never going to be any different for us'" (224). The novel's ending implies a qualified victory for Anne, in that Ross is going to return home, having recognized her fertile strength as well as acknowledged her need for him. It seems fitting, too, that just as Anne begins to feel less alienated from her own body and better balanced emotionally, she actively and almost single-handedly gives birth to her third child, a daughter.

Predictably, Anne's difficulty in coming to terms with the

fertile strength and power of her own body is expressed in her relationship with her children. As a way of dealing with her partial alienation from her body, Anne finds herself adopting increasingly conservative notions about the task of raising children. This conservatism is a self-protective measure. Anne develops a mock-theory to protect herself from the power she wields over her children and to deflect sole responsibility for the way her children "turn out". For instance, she wholeheartedly believes in her duty to feed her children properly. She does not do this out of respect for or knowledge of her own body, but out of guilt that she may otherwise harm her children: "One of the many things motherhood had done to me was produce a deep suspicion of all preservatives and artificial flavours added to food. I'd even gone so far as to shape a theory that these additives fostered not only allergies but drug dependence, personality disorders, depression, violence, and racial tension" (26). Not a bad theory for a mother to hold, actually, insofar as it protects her from blaming herself for any of these problems in her children, as our mother-blaming society would encourage her to do.

But even this theory cannot protect her from the judgments of a society where the mother is held responsible for all aspects of a child's behaviour. When Martha throws a tantrum in the middle of the supermarket, Anne wryly thinks, "It was hard to believe...that here was a child whose diet was almost entirely free of preservatives" (27). But she fights against society's

censure of the mother in a different way. When bystanders of Martha's tantrum make remarks about how they would handle such a child (insinuating, if not outright stating, that the mother is to blame for not knowing how to control her child), Anne makes a show of solidarity with her child, against the critics of society (27-30).

Despite such infrequent shows of defiance, Anne makes several comments throughout the novel about how conservative motherhood has actually made her. Again, these comments are self-protective, in that they protect Anne from blaming herself (or from accepting the blame of others) for how her children behave or turn out. They also betray the extent to which the conservative impulses forced upon mothers in our society--and sometimes mothering itself--are unnatural, even foreign, to women. For instance, when Anne compares herself to her neighbour Margaret's teenaged daughter, Pat, she can hardly believe how much mothering has changed her, and wonders at how suddenly her interests and allegiances could shift; where she used to identify with the rebellious impulses of teenagers, she now identifies with the teenager's mother. She realizes that

...from the moment Martha was born, I'd become a true-blue conservative, a supporter of the law, regular bowel movements, safety belts, and correct grammar. It's not a conversion I was really prepared for, then or now, and at moments like these it still gave me a vaguely bewildered feeling of being alienated from my own tribe. Even Pat's habit of making most statements into questions, as if it were stupid to be sure of anything, however trivial, reminded me how dogmatic motherhood had made me, how prematurely middle-aged. (217)

Even Anne's mother, Billie, finds her too conservative in relation to her children (117). And such accusations from the people who know Anne as a person apart from her motherhood are equally difficult for Anne, who tries repeatedly to reconcile her identity as mother with her identity as a woman. Mother-blame is a potent force in the novel, as it is in society. Even while Anne unconsciously refuses to accept the mother-blame that society imposes upon her, she herself is caught in the cycle of blaming other mothers, including her friend Margaret, her mother-in-law Edwina, and her own mother.

For Anne, her neighbour Margaret is initially a model of successful marriage and motherhood (95). Margaret and her husband "had that rare thing: a perfect marriage....They were like a pair of matched gloves, made of the same material and design, and I often thought of them with envy as I struggled to cope with the squabbling, complicated mess of my own married life" (110). But everything is not as it seems. Anne is shocked and fascinated to find out that Margaret leads a double life, spending part of her time in an affair and mock marriage with her ex-husband: "How it thrilled me to know that here was a liar, schemer, and pagan even more deplorable than myself" (112). Tied up therefore in Anne's admiration of Margaret (both the superb housewife and the schemer) are her own feelings of self-blame and lack of worth. These women are caught in a cycle of self- and woman-blame, as Margaret's attempt to blame her Aunt Maud evidences (112). More woman-blame is carried out by Anne in her relation with Margaret

when she irrationally says that "Margaret had been the ideal friend, calm, cheerful, and efficient. And yet it was Margaret, ironically enough, who was responsible - indirectly of course - for the worst row Ross and I ever had" (96).

Finally, Anne seems to take a masochistic pleasure in seeing Margaret torn between her two lives. On her way back home one day, Anne spots Margaret rushing by with her head ducked low, obviously not wanting to be seen. Anne observes:

Two things about this intrigued me greatly, One was that it was certainly Margaret behind those shades. The other was that before she slipped them on, I had distinctly seen that they covered a whopping black eye. My depression lifted dramatically....How fascinating it was to speculate which one of her husbands had given it to her, and in the course of what kind of uncivilized debate. Did one of them want a divorce, and if so, which? Maddening to think that I might never know. On the other hand, maybe it was more fun to be kept guessing. (184-185)

This sense of taking pleasure in another woman's pain, and of perpetuating the victimization of women, is a common theme in the patriarchal construction of mothering in our society. The way that patriarchy maintains the subjugation of women is by keeping them separate from one another (Rossiter 280). The Marriage Bed reflects this view in Anne's indoctrination in the values of patriarchy, whereby she can view Margaret's abuse as a diversion.<sup>12</sup>

Anne is similarly guilty of blaming Edwina Graham, her mother-in-law. Beresford-Howe begins by characterizing Anne's relationship with her mother-in-law as typically unpleasant, forced, and insincere. For comic effect, she draws on the long

history of mother-in-law jokes and jibes (Rich, Woman 186-187). But ultimately, Anne is forced to acknowledge that Edwina Graham is a complex, multi-dimensional woman with struggles and needs of her own. The caricaturish depiction of the mother-in-law, prim, proper, repressed, and repressive, coming to tea and bringing suitable gifts for the grandchildren, gives way to the woman who handles the news of Anne's pre-marital pregnancy with greater tact than do Anne's own parents, who matter-of-factly urges her son to take responsibility for his fatherhood and marry Anne, and who receives Anne's tribute at the end of the novel in having their second daughter named after her. In one scene, during a typically painful, postured tea party in Anne's living room, Edwina speaks relatively openly of her difficult marriage. Anne is surprised and interested to find that Edwina has more to offer than superficial tokens of motherliness; she has the experience of motherhood and marriage behind her. Anne recognizes that Edwina is an individual, a woman with experiences not unlike Anne's own, and she feels empathy for her:

For the first time in our acquaintance, I caught sight of a life's disappointment, frustration, bewilderment, in the pale blue of her foolish eyes. It amazed me to find she knew herself so well. Poor woman. What a fate, to be trapped like that for all those years, between two egos. It was a surprise - almost a shock - to find myself feeling real pity for her, even a flicker of genuine loving-kindness. But what a rat-hole life is, I thought angrily, if it can actually make you love an ass like Edwina Graham. (52)

Anne's moment of insight is fleeting, but irreversible, as she herself realizes when she thinks "almost with relief how much

more comfortable it would be if we could just keep on wearing our old attitudes" (53). She cannot escape now the knowledge that she has contributed in her active dislike of Ross's mother to the perpetuation of the mother-blaming posture adopted by patriarchal society, and if she does not begin to see her mother-in-law as an individual in her own right, she will be contributing to her own victimization as a member of the repressed and ridiculed group of traditional mothers.

While Anne covertly holds her own mother responsible for a "rootless past" (42), her mother, Billie, avoids accepting mother-blame by having irrevocably rejected the role of the traditional mother. After her husband, Anne's father, dies, Billie and Anne move restlessly from one town to another. Billie tells her daughter: "'We're not a family any more, you see. Just a couple of people travelling together. Trying to be considerate to each other, and amusing company. That's all'" (15). Anne's choice of the traditional career of stay-at-home mother reflects her desire to offer her children the security she lacked. In contrast, she remembers, "with some bitterness...the five suitcases Billie and I used to tote from seaside hotel to seaside hotel, like a pair of travelling actors. I see now that Billie probably felt the need to play over and over again the role of pretty young widow with child; but in those days I never really knew my part. Children get their sense of security from their background, and I had none that lasted; it kept folding and dropping away like stage sets" (43). Here, the tone is very close

to mother-blaming, but Beresford-Howe refuses to allow Billie to be blamed for poor mothering by having Billie relinquish all claims to the role of mother.

Billie had never allowed me to call her Mummy or even Mother - not so much because it dated her as because the relationship seemed to her irrelevant. As for being a grandmother, the very thought of it was in her view a feeble joke. She regarded Hugh and Martha (when she couldn't avoid directly confronting them) with amusement, even a sort of remote affection; but their company bored her to desperation. Oddly enough, I resented this far less than Edwina's dutiful parade of concern and attention. (81)

In comparing her mother to her mother-in-law, Anne comes close to articulating her own inner conflict with the need to fill the caring role of mother and the belief inherited from her own mother that roles are unnatural, boring, and limiting, or, worse, that they can make you appear as insincere as Edwina does. Similarly, the two mothers embody Anne's inner conflict between respect for tradition and security (Edwina), and enjoyment of frivolity and unconventionality (Billie).

Becoming a mother herself forces Anne to try to reach an accommodation with the role her mother so tacitly refused to play. Somewhere within herself, Anne longs to be so self-assured that she, like Billie, could laugh at herself. Anne confesses that "all our lives till recently I'd considered Billie the child and myself the adult" (85). Now, in the last stages of her third pregnancy, she finds herself yearning desperately for her mother: "the need to see her came over me with the physical urgency of a stitch in the side" (81). Anne resists confronting the painful

reality of her mother's lonely existence because doing so would involve seeing her mother truly as an individual woman, and not as the inadequate mother against whom she can define herself.

At the heart of her ambivalent feelings for her mother is the sense that she cannot trust her completely. This feeling of insecurity has its roots in Anne's childhood, in incidents involving a horrible, tormenting babysitter (28), in a friend of Anne's whose wife makes unsupported accusations (179-181), and in Anne's cold, quarrelsome father (120-121). With the father's death, "Billie became invisible", and Anne "thought she'd died too. Nobody had time to explain anything to me" (187). These feelings of guilt and betrayal in relation to her mother inform her own concept of what mothering should be.

In the present, Anne's security needs are again upset by Billie's confession that her life's aim has been almost singularly to divert herself from her pain and loneliness. She explains to Anne the reason they kept moving from one resort to another was that Billie "'liked to look out and see no limits anywhere. That way I could think [your father] was still somewhere'" (121). Anne would like to think that Max, Billie's second husband, has brought greater security to their lives. But Max, like everyone else that Billie interacts with, alternately amuses and bores her (119). These revelations about Billie upset Anne--"I didn't want to see Billie or remember what she'd told me" (122)--because they rehash all the fears she felt as a child that her mother was inaccessible, uncaring, and unwilling to

mother. However, Anne comes to understand that her mother's security needs are just as strong as Anne's own, and probably even less fulfilled. This understanding involves Anne in seeing Billie not as a mother denying Anne's needs (and thereby victimizing her), but as a woman having her own needs unmet (and thereby being victimized). Anne finds it impossible to blame another victim for her own victimization. This understanding represents the achievement of a mature view of relations between mothers and daughters.

Despite her ambivalent feelings for her mother, Anne ultimately recognizes that there is wisdom in Billie's way of dealing with her frustration and pain. In Billie's persistent "silliness" and her desire to avoid boredom in its many forms, we see her peculiar way of coping and of striving to meet her own needs. When Billie presents "naughty" chocolates to the children, (in contrast to Edwina's practical, educational gifts), stating, "'I believe in giving people things that aren't good for them....What else are presents for?'" (123), Anne comments: "With Billie, frivolity sometimes reached the point of wisdom" (123). She has to admire her mother's matter-of-fact approach to most things, including marriage. For example, when Billie agrees to marry Max, she has no romantic or sentimental illusions. She says to Anne that she and Max

'...are both pretty wise birds, in our different ways...you get to a point in life when you know more than you want to know...I mean when there are no starry-eyed delusions about anything. Marriages, for instance. They are deals. Max and I both know that. A sort of trade-off on both sides. Nothing

soppy or romantic about it at all. I get security and companionship. He gets...well....Of course, you realize he's marrying both of us....He thinks the world of you - admiration, respect - the lot. Me he will keep as a pet.'  
(46)

Anne is "shocked by what I recognized as the naked truth. It alarmed me considerably, because I thought no one having such thoughts could possibly marry in spite of them. In this, as in so many other things, I was, of course, wrong" (46). Not until Anne can freely admit and learn from Billie's wisdom and experience will she be able to see her mother as an individual, something she has resisted doing her whole life.

This recognition can come only after Anne has herself experienced the difficulties of married life. She usually resists seeing issues from the practical position Billie adopts. In fact, Anne has always been more sentimental than her mother (as is evidenced in her fierce indignation when she discovers that her mother has had men in their room in the hotels where they lived when Anne was a teenager [68-72]), less pragmatic about getting her needs met however she can, less willing to accept that life is often sordid and matter-of-fact. But finally, she understands that while she "couldn't agree with Billie's definition of marriage as a deal, [she'd] come to realize lately it was something that involved more tough concessions and trade-offs than [she] used to imagine" (110). In the end, though, it is the values she inherits from Billie--the necessity of compromise in marriage, the abandoning of stubborn pride, the acceptance of pain in her relationships with others, the avoidance of "boredom"

at all costs--these and other values prompt her to take action in repairing her damaged marriage. When she seeks out Ross to ask him to come back home, she says to him: "'even when we're at each other's throats, something's there, kicking like a wild horse.... Which is worse, to live with ulcers or boredom?'" (224). The implication is that boredom is worse than conflict--a conviction inherited from Billie. Similarly, having seen Billie forego the meeting of her own needs, Anne is convinced that she must state what her needs are and demand that Ross respect them. Anne tells Ross: "'I want you the hell home....I need you. I can't cope alone. You think I'm powerful and tough, but I'm not. The way I feel about it, I'm ready to make any kind of deal, anything. I'll keep the house neater. This can be our last baby. Do you get the message?'" (224). In the true spirit of compromise, again acquired from Billie, Anne deals more honestly with her own needs and Ross's expectations of her. Willing to make a "deal" with Ross, she is not willing to continue alone, not having her own needs for love, security, and closeness satisfied. Thus Anne is able to strive for balance in her marriage and redefine her role to gain what is most important for herself.

This recognition of her mother's individuality is related to Anne's most important insight about the work of mothering: that it must meet the needs of the individual mother and children in order to be rewarding. Thus can Billie's mothering be free from blame because Billie has maintained her individuality while also encouraging her daughter's individuality. Anne also recognizes

this need for mothers to be true to themselves in her relations with other mothers, especially with her friend Jennifer Mugabwe, a single mother who owns the neighbourhood craft shop. Anne admires but could never emulate Jennifer's cool, detached relationship with those around her, including her infant son. Anne feels envious of her matter-of-fact approach to mothering (24), by the way she would be "proprietary without being possessive" (25). (Implicit here again is the social construction of "good" mothering, in which a mother must guard against holding her children too closely, or for too long.) Anne comes to understand that Jen's mothering style is an expression of her own selfhood and her need to protect herself from becoming too close to others who might hurt her, and not the embodiment of a socially endorsed model of good mothering (184).

In fact, it is always in breaking the "rules" of good mothering and in finding her own interaction that Anne discovers her greatest connectedness to her children, such as when they play "Cave Bears" (72-73).<sup>13</sup> "Cave Bears" ignores the advice of child "experts", male doctors who prescribe regular schedules, separation of space into distinct spheres of activity (for sleeping, eating, playing), and similar limitations on the mother's interaction with her children. In forging her own interaction with her children, Anne meets both her needs and her children's. Thus is mothering freely chosen and carried out.<sup>14</sup> The implications of all these examples of mothering are serious: if there was only one "right" way to mother, if all mothers were

the same, then individual women would have to sacrifice their own strengths and needs to serve a limited, patriarchally determined definition of mothering. In Beresford-Howe's suggestion of effective mothering, the main objective would be for the mother to attempt to meet her children's needs while remaining true to her own goals and needs in her daily interaction with her children.

Anne must struggle against formidable odds to extract such a lesson from the myriad and opposing examples and advice she receives from those around her.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, she must contend with socially prescribed views of mothering that tell her she must always put her children and her husband before herself;<sup>16</sup> on the other hand, she is under pressure from similarly entrapped women and her own parents to pursue a career. Most of all, she must deal with her conflicting desires and complex needs while redefining the role of mother to include her own sense of autonomous identity.

At times it seems that Anne is able to redefine her roles in spite of her own socially ingrained beliefs about what it is to be a mother and wife. This gap between her thoughts and her actions illustrates the difference between institutionalized motherhood and mothering in practice. Even while she is apologizing to Ross for suffocating him, he is recognizing that nothing will change, and decides to accept Anne as she is (222-224). Similarly, Anne struggles to understand how she can have such ambivalent feelings for her children, when she has been told

that a mother's love is unconditional. She remembers how colicky Martha's "hours of nightly screaming drove [her] so nearly berserk that [she] was afraid of what [she] might do to her" (145), in contrast with a moment of tenderness shared with her daughter: "Here at last was something of value salvaged from the trivial chaos of the day - something beautiful, perfect, and undeserved" (58). In fact, Anne is finally able to accept her own ambivalence, and this is her major achievement in redefining her roles. Near the end of the novel, she says to Max, who is pressuring her to make changes in her life--divorce Ross, remarry, find a job--:

'I like being at home with my children. I'm not a victim or a martyr. I'm a natural, normal woman. There is nothing being wasted here. Do you really think what happens in kitchens and bedrooms isn't important? I tell you, half of what goes on in labs and offices and classrooms is trivial by comparison. This is where it's all at, not out there. Anyhow, that's how I see it. For the next five years at least, these kids are going to need me here, and here is where I'm going to be. Full time. After that, sure, I might get a part-time job, or go back to graduate school. For God's sake, I'm barely twenty-four. So will you get it through your head, I'm not some poor victim in chains. Even if I were, I'd stay in them. My kids are not going to wander the streets with a door-key round their necks. They are not going to be entertained by the neighbourhood flasher while I'm somewhere else being liberated.'

I concluded this tirade with the greatest firmness and dignity, and then burst into loud, childish sobbing. (206)

Anne's stated conviction that she is doing what she chooses to do, juxtaposed with the sobbing at the end of her assertion, provides a clear picture of her ambivalence towards her roles as mother and wife. But part of her redefinition of these roles is articulated in this important passage: the belief that the duties

involved in these roles are not fixed forever. In five years' time, Anne may choose to do something different; she sees her role as malleable. This view, according to Adrienne Rich, is an important facet of a woman's definition of her self as an individual (Woman 36-37, 212). She must be able to see her roles and functions changing with her changing self. Only then can these roles empower and meet the needs of women.

The female protagonist of A Serious Widow (1991), Rowena Hill, is also faced with redefining her roles as mother and wife. Her struggle to define her identity apart from her role as wife is less complicated than Anne Graham's because it is carried out in isolation, her husband, Edwin, having died and left her a widow. Her search for identity is prompted not only by widowhood but also by her discovery that her marriage to Edwin was never legitimate, that he was a bigamist, and that Rowena was his second, unlawful wife.

At first Rowena is frightened and unsure at the loss of her role, although the loss of her husband is not unwelcome, as her thoughts at his graveside show: "while his death was totally unexpected (though not from time to time unwished for), it's brought me nothing that could be remotely described as grief....Try surprise. Try relief" (2-3). She does not have fond memories of her marriage to a man who was "never, ever, in the wrong about anything" (3-4), who possessed "the Seven Deadly

Virtues": "law-abiding, thrifty, church-going, scrupulous, decent, monogamous, sober" (4). But as Rowena soon discovers, all is not as it seems: her husband was certainly not monogamous, for one. Nonetheless, this truth does not change the fact that Rowena was repressed in her relationship with Edwin. Married when he was forty and she was seventeen, Rowena never had the opportunity to explore or establish her own identity outside of their marriage, and so is faced with the daunting prospect of survival and self-discovery at the age of fifty, after thirty years of a repressive and resentful union.

Never having had to make choices or decisions for herself, always having had to please Edwin and meet his needs and demands, Rowena is not prepared to take responsibility for her own choices, or to understand and to meet her own needs. She married him to meet her one primary need for security. Rowena remembers: "I sincerely believed I loved him. Even then, though, I was honest enough to know I also loved the prospect of never having to use that hated shorthand. I was so absurdly incomplete as a person - indeed, I still am - I actually thought relief was the chief component of happiness" (28). She has always suppressed her own desires in favour of Edwin's, mostly out of fear of his wrath or the wish to avoid an argument with him. She recalls one year when Edwin finds out about the watch she bought for their daughter Marion's birthday, without consulting Edwin. He plays the part of the cold, injured husband, she of the obedient wife:

'..Apparently you have no respect at all for my opinion....I get no co-operation from you. You've spent money I can't afford - but that's not the point. What I can't accept is your brand of passive resistance - worse, your deceit; your disloyalty.'

I had no answer to that; the raw truth of it silenced me. Next day I took the little watch back to the shop where, after some unpleasantness with the manager, Edwin's money was refunded. Marion got a new winter coat for her birthday instead. (217)

Rowena consistently denies her own wishes by giving in to Edwin's manipulation of her need for security. She bitterly recalls: "Because I had nothing else, still less anything better, the withdrawal of whatever he felt for me, even if it was only approval, could not be endured. In the end I wept" (217-218). Rowena's dependence on Edwin comes as a result of fear of the unknown, in particular, fear of the unknown in herself. She married Edwin right after her grandmother, Nana, who had raised her, died. She was alone in the world, without any prospects for independent survival, and felt helpless enough to let Edwin take care of her (28). She did not yet know how much pain and guilt that feeling of being a fearful burden would bring her. Her suffering under Edwin's harsh, penny-pinching ways proves to be far more destructive to her sense of self than if she had tried to survive on her own.

Even after his death, she is doubtful whether she can look after herself. It is not until the hearing in which her lawyer, Cuthbert, makes application for Spousal Relief for Rowena, and the judge turns it down, that Rowena realizes she is capable of taking care of herself, both physically and emotionally. The

judge, a "small lady in black" who "speaks...in a voice so soft I have some trouble hearing her", gives back to Rowena some of the self-confidence that Edwin so routinely denied her (237). The judge concludes:

'The deciding factors in this case appear to me to be the poor health and advanced age of the legitimate spouse.' Here she looks at me in a friendly, even kindly manner. 'The deceased having made no provision for Mrs. Rowena Hill, a relatively young woman,' she goes on, 'it must be assumed he thought her quite capable of self-support, as I do myself. I therefore cannot find in favour of her application for relief. The claim of John Hill to the estate, on behalf of his mother, is valid.'

Here, after gently nudging her bodyguard awake, she rises. So, to my surprise, do I. In an almost audible voice I say to her, 'Thank you.' (237)

Later, Rowena tells Cuthbert that "'Truly, I almost feel as if in a way we've won, not lost....You heard what she said. "Capable of self-support...as I do myself." That's a lot. I mean a judge actually thinks I can cope. She assumes Edwin thought so, too. Never mind the estate - such as it is - that's a lot for her to give me, you must see that'" (238). The judge has articulated what Rowena herself is beginning to feel: that she is capable of meeting her own needs, that "Edwin's dead hand can never reach out to me again; not after today. This itself is such a discovery, and such a release, that nothing else really counts" (238-239). Rowena is finally on her own, and she likes it.

With this renewed self-confidence, Rowena can begin to forgive Edwin for the misery he brought her. Looking around the house they inhabited together--and yet so separately--for thirty years, Rowena comments:

I gaze curiously at the faded upholstery of Edwin's chair and the end of the kitchen table where he always laid his carefully folded newspaper, marvelling that these things remain while he is so totally and finally gone. I ponder this for some time. Until now I haven't found it possible to think of him with any kind of detachment. But today for the first time I can consider him almost - though perhaps not quite - kindly.

I wander into the sitting-room again and look at the shabby books in their case. He always resented them ('Why have you always got your nose in a book?'), but perhaps that was an admission of loneliness. They were my defense and refuge, and they shut him out. (249)

Only with her growing sense of self can Rowena begin to imagine what Edwin's thoughts and feelings were. She stops seeing herself and Edwin as a dysfunctional couple, and starts to understand that they were two individuals, with individual needs, thoughts, expectations, and desires. Only by seeing herself as an individual whose needs were not being met can she see that perhaps Edwin--also an individual--was not having his own needs met. With this new insight about their respective needs, she remarks, "It's not the hypocrisy of his churchgoing now that strikes me, but the possibility that he sincerely needed his religion. The communion service, after all, is about guilt" (249). With her own sense of an autonomous self emerging, she is able to acknowledge that perhaps they were equally entrapped in the dependency and guilt of their marriage.

Part of finding her own identity involves Rowena in rediscovering her repressed sexuality. She describes her experience of intercourse with Edwin as first surprising and painful, then merely routine:

The first night or the nine hundredth, or the last - nothing really distinguished one from the other. Except that the first had an element of surprise, perhaps better described as shock....

Nana's pretty image of dandelion seeds floating on the breeze vanished in a stab of pain. I resisted, whimpering. The shock that followed came not so much from his use of force, but from the gradual realization, many times later verified, that it was my reluctance that excited him most. How long was it before I understood that, and all that it implied about both of us? A long time, because it was not a lesson I was willing to learn. Eventually, though, I learned it. And resorted to cunning. It was all over much more quickly if I feigned ready consent. (43)

Rowena concludes that "Celibacy is the ideal condition, as far as I'm concerned. Death has at least liberated me from the routine carnal procedure required of wives. As for orgasm, that is nothing but a word...a catch-phrase to express the fantasies of housewives" (43). But in her romantic interludes with Tom, the church Canon, who seduces her, and Cuthbert, her lawyer, whom she seduces (both friends of Edwin's who offer various forms of help and support to Rowena after his death), Rowena discovers that her suppressed sexual needs can also be satisfied.

Rowena's former sexual repression is related to her fertility and ability to bear children. Thus is her repression related to the conception and birth of her daughter, Marion. She tells Cuthbert how she "didn't let Edwin know I was pregnant till I was in the fourth month, because I was so afraid he'd insist on an abortion" (227). When Edwin did find out Rowena was pregnant,

'He was furious, as if I'd impregnated myself...For a whole week he barely spoke to me. It meant, among other things, that instead of spending what my grandmother left us on a car, we had to make a downpayment on this house, and saddle him with a mortgage as well. So I carried all this guilt

around for the rest of the nine months, plus the fear he'd resent me even more if it weren't a son....After that, without of course denying himself anything, he vetoed any more children, though I badly wanted more. Couldn't afford it, he said. But he could afford to pack me off to the doctor to be fitted for a thing I loathed using...After that it was the pill, never mind that it gave me headaches and depression. After all, it was only me. And I didn't even exist except as Mrs. Edwin Hill, did I? And then even my name - if you call it mine - turned out to be a fraud. What a dirty thing betrayal is. It taints the victim, too, because what happened was that I betrayed myself.' (61-62)

This passage suggests Rowena's complex internalization of guilt related to her sexuality, fertility, and identity. It also makes explicit some of the roots of Rowena's distant relationship with her daughter Marion. From the start, her pregnancy was a source of tension and worry, and involved her in denying and ignoring her own feelings because she was so concerned about protecting herself from Edwin's disapproval and disappointment. Thus she was never able to express her feelings of fulfillment and joy at the birth of her daughter. She was deprived of the experience because she had to concern herself solely with Edwin's needs and feelings. And, of course, it is precisely such elemental feelings as would have contributed to Rowena's building of a more reliable self-identity.

Alienation from her own body and from the experience of carrying, giving birth to, and caring for her baby also anticipated Rowena's distant relationship with her daughter. Rowena compares her utter helplessness after Edwin's death with the panic she felt when Marion was born: "The weight of all there is to do, and decide, and cope with now - all for what? for whom?"

- seems to pin me flat to the bed, as it did the day after Marion's birth when, confronted with parenthood, I thought simply, I can't do this" (21). The distance between mother and daughter is further exacerbated by Edwin and Marion's close relationship, so close in fact that Rowena feels that Marion was always more married to Edwin than she herself was (109). Rowena's view of herself as helpless, irresponsible, and immature (an image Edwin did everything he could to bolster), has ensured that Rowena's mother-daughter relationship has victimized her as much as her wife-husband relationship. In fact, her relationship with her daughter is very similar to that she had with her husband; Marion is bossy, condescending, interfering, and perpetually exasperated with her mother. She is able to treat her mother in this manner because Rowena has such low self-confidence and virtually no identity of her own to protect. Although it may seem that Rowena's inadequacy in her mothering role devolves from her victimization in her role as wife, I would suggest that Beresford-Howe links these two roles not to give primacy to one over the other, but to illustrate the extent to which these two nurturing roles are potentially repressive in their institutionalized forms. That is, Beresford-Howe is not primarily concerned with the generational or sexual relations that characterize these roles, but rather with the qualities of nurturing and meeting others' needs that these two roles have in common. The repression results from the caregiver's forced neglect of her own needs, a neglect which is exacerbated by the

demands of husband and child.

Rowena's growing insistence on meeting her own needs causes relations between mother and daughter to change quite dramatically over the course of the novel. With her emerging sense of self-worth and individuality, Rowena begins to notice that Marion's bossiness and interference in her life irritate her considerably, something she never allowed herself to feel before. It frightens Rowena to have these feelings because she is entering unknown territory, and because she dreads conflict in any form. Nonetheless, the steady movement towards confrontation in their relationship cannot be halted now that Rowena has started to discover hidden strengths in herself, including her ability to stand up for herself, articulate her own needs and desires, confront her fears, and enjoy life's little surprises.

As with her memory of Edwin, Rowena is better able to deal with Marion honestly when she begins to see herself and Marion as individuals. This recognition is liberating, because it allows women to forego the institutionalized, conventional relationships and feelings that they are expected to have with and for their children. The institutionalization of the mother-daughter relationship distorts it by privileging the relationship itself over the individuals involved in those relations. Not surprisingly, then, only two possible kinds of relationship are acknowledged: extreme compatibility and love, or extreme incompatibility, coupled with the daughter's blame and even hatred of the mother (Caplan 2). When Rowena learns to see Marion

as an individual and not simply as the other half of the mother-daughter equation, she moves away from the polarized, institutionalized view of mother-daughter relations and towards a more sincere appreciation of her daughter.

One of the strangest ways Rowena deals with her difficult daughter is by carrying on an imaginary interior dialogue with the novelist Ethel Wilson, who helps her come to the conclusion that she does not have to love Marion just because she is her daughter. Rowena understands that though that may be true, though she may not be able to love Marion as an individual, she still loves her simply because she is her daughter. But Ethel points out that "'Attempting to love anybody a hundred per cent of the time is never advisable'", or, for that matter, possible. She tells Rowena, "'Ten per cent, in this case, I would call generous'" (282). Beresford-Howe's use of the voice of Ethel Wilson as a counterpoint and complement to Rowena's thoughts is an effective way of dealing with Rowena's ambivalent and contradictory feelings for her roles. Having the two voices in conversation (when of course both are articulating only Rowena's thoughts) allows Beresford-Howe to show a woman struggling within herself to come to terms with her feelings of love and resentment for her daughter, of anger and pity for her husband, and thereby seeking to redefine the central roles of wife and mother. One of the first confessions Rowena makes in the novel is that she has "acted (not very well) the part of mother and housewife, while in the privacy of my own head, I've lived another existence

entirely, with Mrs. Wilson and Prince Charles. A hidden, dotty, and very real life, concealed successfully from everyone, even my own child" (18). Here Rowena expresses guilt and sadness at her own detachment from her roles, at her "own brand of subversion....A protection against everything, chiefly the use of power" (19). Consequently, she has to see herself as contributing to her own oppression, and must take responsibility for her poor relationship with Marion and for her failed marriage. At the same time, however, accepting responsibility for her own choices empowers her and allows her to redefine her poorly acted roles as ones that she can engage in more fully and openly.

To this end, she must confront Marion and state her own needs clearly and unequivocally. Near the end of the novel, Rowena speaks:

'Marion.' I take a moment here to muster my forces, inadvertently creating an impressive pause. 'Your intentions are good, I suppose, though there's plenty of room for doubt about that. The point is this: I have never since your teens burdened you with unwanted advice. I have nothing to say about your own living arrangements, for instance. Now it's high time you returned the compliment. For better or worse, I'm an adult capable of making my own decisions. What's more, you owe me, whether you like it or not, some tact and consideration. No matter how much your nature and judgement differ from mine, they don't entitle you to dismiss me as if I were nobody.' (272)

After this speech, Rowena takes a grim sort of satisfaction in seeing that she has actually intimidated Marion: "when she turns at the door with a stiff farewell nod, I see, just for the fraction of a second, that she is afraid to say anything more. For the first time in our joint lives, in fact, she is afraid of

me" (272). Beresford-Howe leaves her readers with the hope that Rowena and Marion's relationship will improve and benefit from this more honest interaction.

Ultimately, Rowena's successful redefinition of her roles finds focus in the relationship with her neighbour's ninety-year-old father, Sebastian Long.<sup>17</sup> When living conditions in his run-down oversized home, run by a malevolent housekeeper, deteriorate to the point where Seb will have to go to a nursing home, Rowena invites Seb to live with her. Up until now, Rowena has felt that she has been a failure in her two mutually exclusive roles of wife and mother. The multiple demands on her energies and on her capacity to give, coupled with the absence of reciprocated caring, were simply beyond Rowena's abilities. Taking in Seb as a boarder and housemate allows Rowena to reclaim, fuse, and redefine her spousal and maternal roles. Because their relationship is presented as a mock-marriage, it allows Rowena to seek to redress the coldness and distance of her marriage to Edwin. Furthermore, Seb helps her to liberate her mind, her intellectual and emotional inhibitions, and to express and find fulfilment of her need for nurturing and caring for others. He also allows her to meet her genuine maternal need for helping others, a need that was denied by Edwin's coldness and Marion's matter-of-factness.

Rowena's successful relationship with Seb teaches her that one's success in either of the roles of wife or mother (or any traditional women's role) depends not on being a "good" mother or

wife as it is institutionally defined by patriarchy, but on defining it for oneself, based on one's own needs and talents. In A Serious Widow, Rowena's freely chosen role of caregiver to Seb forms the foundation of her redefinition of her roles as wife and mother--that is, of her rediscovered self.

Notes to Chapter 4

- 1 In From Private to Public: A Feminist Exploration of Early Mothering (Toronto: Women's Press, 1988), Amy Rossiter describes her own experience of becoming a mother as involving "the realization that I was inextricably bound up with my social context; that I was no exception to demands of patriarchy....This realization started me on the road toward an understanding of how my experiences were put together outside of me, in the interests of capitalist patriarchy, and then made to seem my choice" (11-12).
- 2 Donald W. Winnicott writes of "good enough" mothers in The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development (New York: International Universities Press, 1965). Vivien Nice is critical of Winnicott's position in her analysis of the patriarchal construction of mother/daughter relationships in Mothers and Daughters: The Distortion of A Relationship (London: MacMillan, 1992). She argues that Winnicott adopts a typically psychoanalytic mother-blaming stance, even while acknowledging that mothers are not perfect; he concedes that mothers succeed in being "good enough".
- 3 Amy Rossiter discusses at length the issue of the isolation characteristic of the work of mothering: "Isolation is the factor through which women's practice of mothering is organized - and that organization grounds sole caretaking" (241). She explains how "the isolation of women in the home is 'normal and natural'....To be a perfect ideological mother, one must tolerate isolation. Nathalie [in one case study] teaches us that tolerating isolation is rooted and maintained in the disempowerment of women" (262). Further, this isolation reinforces women's loss of identity not only by separating women from one another, but also by separating mothers from the world around them: "mothering involves listening, trial and error learning, changing one's rhythm, working simultaneously at different levels, uncertainty, and physical exhaustion. Such work requires a tremendous fluidity of identity....In conditions of isolation this fluidity is experienced as a loss of self - not because babies are so voracious, but because the social situations in which one's identity is normally continuously re-constituted simply disappear. Mothers are left without the social interactions which construct and produce identity; at the same time, they are expected to perform work which demands a kind of diffusion of identity. In a very real sense, mothers feel they have 'lost' their selves" (244). In summary, she suggests that perpetuating the isolation of mother work is a strategy employed by patriarchy to ensure women's - and children's - powerlessness: "Isolation is a form of oppression on a day-to-day basis, as well as being

directly implicated in the production of gender identity. Isolation produces a sense of loss of self, as one's work is reduced to invisibility. It punishes children by not allowing them to participate in the world. It holds children to blame for their needs, which are in fact distorted and exaggerated through isolation. It robs women of the ability to organize collectively. It stanches both women's and children's creative potential....A discourse which indicts isolation must become broadly known" (280). See also Dorothy Hobson, "Housewives: Isolation and Oppression," Women Take Issue, Ed. The Women's Studies Group, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London: Hutchinson, 1978).

- 4 Here as elsewhere in her fiction (notably A Population of One), Beresford-Howe deals peripherally with the issue of abortion as a matter of a woman being true to herself, rather than as a strictly biological or ethical question. Whether those needs are moral, emotional, social, psychological, or financial, Beresford-Howe presents the decision of whether or not to abort a pregnancy in terms of the woman's personal choice and needs. This conviction is clearly shown in The Marriage Bed, where Anne first decides she does not feel capable of aborting her pregnancy based on her need to offer and receive love and to uphold a sense of rightness and morality in her life, but then later decides it is the only thing to do for herself, given the circumstances and her need to pursue an independent life after she and Ross cancel the wedding. On her way to the clinic, she again changes her mind, based on some new insights about herself and her relation to the world. She discovers in herself a need to nurture and protect life, and this need is reflected in her decision to carry the pregnancy to term.
- 5 The symbol of the womb as both prison and as refuge finds a parallel in the symbol of the cave as womb and as kitchen, both realms associated with motherhood. For a further discussion of these symbols, see Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York and London: Norton, 1976; 1986, p.188.
- 6 Rossiter corroborates this assertion in her observation that "images of mothering, created by men who are located in the ruling apparatus, have helped to structure women's concepts of mothering. We are led to believe, for example, that our culture's organization of mothering derives from nature. When this 'fact' becomes part of our common-sense knowledge, we tend to overlook the organization of mothering through history, through the material world, and through language. Overlooking these constitutive processes enables us to overlook the ways in which we create a culture based on relations of domination" (18).

- 7 I am grateful to Gerald Lynch for pointing out how this conflict between male and female notions of what constitutes "order" is one that is played out in other Canadian women's fiction- in, for instance, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood. Perhaps the suggestion is that the words "orderly" and "disorderly" are patriarchal impositions on "women's ways" of ordering experience, ways that are inaccessible and incomprehensible to men.
- 8 In Of Woman Born, Rich defines men's major dilemma in patriarchy in relation to the one power women have over men: the ability to produce life. She writes that "There is much to suggest that the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of dependence on a woman for life itself, [in] the son's constant effort to assimilate, compensate for, or deny the fact that he is 'of woman born'" (11). See also pages 67-71.
- 9 This expectation recalls the archetypal image of the woman as Angel in the House. In Don't Blame Mother, Paula Caplan describes this idealized image of the mother, which "stem[s] from our heritage from the Victorian era, when the mother was supposed to be the 'Angel in the House' who soothed husband's and children's tired feet and fevered brows, spoke sweetly and gently, and considered meeting their needs her life's mission" (2). See also Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), for their discussion of how male writers have created this image and used it to subjugate women.
- 10 In Of Woman Born, Rich suggests how the traditional birthing position (lithotomy) has implications for the subjugation of women. According to Rich, lithotomy was first popularized in the Victorian era. "At the onset of labor, the woman was placed in the lithotomy (supine) position, chloroformed, and turned into the completely passive body on which the obstetrician could perform as on a mannequin" (Rich 170). To support her assertion that the lithotomy position is more telling of a patriarchal desire to dominate women than of a desire to cater to women's needs in childbirth, Rich cites the following: "Roberto Caldeyro-Barcia of Argentina puts it succinctly: 'Except for being hanged by the feet...the supine position is the worst conceivable position for labor and delivery'....Forceps deliveries [which can cause severe damage to both mother and child in inexperienced hands] are also more often necessary in the lithotomy position, where the pull of gravity cannot aid in the expulsion of the child.... Moreover, vertical delivery seems to minimize the loss of oxygen to the fetus which results when the uterus is lying on the largest vein in the body (the vena cava)" (178). She continues: "Finally, it was the male practitioners such as

Julien Clement in France and John Leake in England, who established the lithotomy (lying down, therefore passive) position as the preferred one for women in labor. The midwife used the obstetrical chair or the upright position which is still universal outside Western culture and cultures in which Western medical influence prevails, and which is now just beginning to be revived, against the resistance of the profession, in North and South America" (145-146). It is interesting to note that "the chief objection to the use of the obstetrical stool or chair seems to be the obstetricians' belief that it would inconvenience them" (Rich 178).

- 11 Anne reveals a similar alienation from her own body as she gazes at her eight-months pregnant self in the mirror: "What a vision, the eyes sunk in dark pits, the big lips cracked, a pregnancy mask over the cheekbones giving the whole thing a crude, animal solidity. Incredible to recall that people once used to call it beautiful. That was indeed in another country, in the cool, sterile latitudes of virginity" (57). Elsewhere Anne describes herself as being admired by men, particularly older men (10). Like most women in patriarchal society, she finds beauty in her own body only when a man tells her it is beautiful. As Rossiter points out, "dominant discourses define women's bodies as objects designed to get and hold a man" (228).
- 12 A similar interaction occurs between Anne and her neighbour June. In this scenario, however, June, also the mother of two, is the spectator to Anne's next-door drama. Anne often wonders whether June is witnessing events as they happen, and at one point June actually comments to Anne:

'Gee, I don't know, such a lot seems to happen to you.'

'None of it's good, though, kid.'

'Yeah, but at least you're - ' A note crept into her voice that I'd never heard there so clearly before - a sort of flat despair. 'You know, sometimes I wake up mornings, here's another day, and I just think, is this all? You know?' (177)

June is jealous because something, however trivial or unpleasant, is happening in Anne's life. Despite this negative aspect of relations between mothers, these women necessarily understand how isolating a job mothering can be and maintain connections, at least in caregiving. In fact, Anne and June often help one another out by taking care of one another's children when they need to get away.

- 13 As a negative example of how institutionalized mothers fail to seek personal ways of interacting with others, Rossiter

describes how one of her subjects "looks outside herself for the meaning of her experience. She does not use her own location, her own senses, to make meaning. She does not experience herself as a knower; she ignores her own perceptions as she scans authority for the meaning of her reality. Thus, the potential for empowerment that exists in the experience of mothering is lost to her. She uses abstractions that are derived from the dominant ideologies of mothering to structure her experiences....In short, out of a feeling of disempowerment, she is cut off from interaction [with other mothers and her own child] which might have led to support or validation. Instead, she listened to the experts, a process which reproduced her disempowerment" (259-262).

- 14 Anne also learns to recognize the importance of individual mothering styles from her neighbour June (35).
- 15 Anne is not lacking in exemplars who alternately offer her and urge her to pursue options other than traditional motherhood. One such exemplar is Anne's friend, Bonnie. "We both expected her to marry and me to become the Professional Woman; but when it happened the other way around, we became closer than we were before, and interested each other more" (190). Bonnie is a successful executive, with an office that "looked down on a city full of women like me, plodding to and fro spreading peanut butter. It wasn't a distance easy to bridge, but we were still good enough friends to manage it" (189).

Bonnie is the primary spokesperson for radical feminist views in the novel. A firm believer that traditional marriage and motherhood are traps for women, Bonnie is not afraid to say so in a room full of couples: "[Marriage] works because a lot of crazy women are still willing to give up their own lives and live in chains....It's all those centuries of it - lying on your backs in the victim position. Some of you actually like it there'" (65-66). When Ross steps in to defend Anne and the other married women in the room, he and Bonnie have a heated exchange about what constitutes womanhood. Ross accuses Bonnie of naivete, asking her "'You actually believe there's such a thing as freedom? For male or female? You know damn well nobody's free....Come on, be honest. When a woman blames male-dominated society and all that crap for her personal unhappiness, she is just a whining cop-out'" (66). But Bonnie answers "with cold distinctness, 'I am not personally unhappy'" (66). Ross falsely assumes that Bonnie's motivation for defending the rights of women is self-interest. When Bonnie turns expressly to Anne and says: "'You know damn well - or you ought to - for a bright woman, marriage is one of those torture beds, too long or too short, she can never really fit, even if she kills herself

trying. You'd admit it, Anne, if you had the guts'"(67). Bonnie is critical of the way in which women blindly adopt the roles that are thrust upon them, without examining these roles and consciously choosing or rejecting them. Ross jumps right in, not even giving Anne an opportunity to answer. Ross's dominance in the conversation, and the support he receives from the others present, who also have a vested interest in rejecting Bonnie's view, is evidence in itself of Bonnie's claims.

Why Anne does not participate in the discussion is problematic. She only comments to herself afterwards that she "was surprised at Bonnie for being so neurotically dogmatic....It wasn't till a couple of years later I guessed why and forgave her" (67). Is Beresford-Howe here suggesting that Bonnie was then grappling with the possibility of her own motherhood and had to consciously reject that option? I think it is significant that Anne does not speak up to side with either Ross or Bonnie. Perhaps because she was afraid to question whether she had consciously chosen motherhood, now that she was already enmeshed in it. "Perhaps, to be honest after the event, I wanted to protect him from knowing how right she was" (68). This statement in itself is a perfect example of how Anne is living within a contradiction, and with her own ambivalence - she wants to protect (read, mother) Ross from the truth that she might not want to be a mother.

- 16 The woman's prerogative to meet others' needs is perhaps best illustrated in The Marriage Bed when Anne tells Ross she is pregnant the first time. He tries to reason with her, urging her to have an abortion. After a difficult discussion in which Anne is under tremendous emotional strain, "suddenly, without taking his eyes off mine, Ross broke into clumsy sobbing. The tears tumbled out of his eyes in great round globes and poured down his cheeks, and I put my arms around him protectively" (60).
- 17 The character of Sebastian Long - his animation, playful intellect, and engagement with the world around him - is reminiscent of Ethel Wilson's protagonist, Topaz, in The Innocent Traveller (1949). Although Wilson's novel and A Serious Widow differ in terms of narrative strategy and thematic interest, the similarities between the two elderly characters and the presence of Ethel Wilson as a character in Beresford-Howe's novel suggest Beresford-Howe's attempt to engage in a form of literary dialogue with Wilson's work.

## *Conclusion*

The difficulties that Constance Beresford-Howe's heroines encounter in trying to redefine their traditional roles mirror the debates within feminist writing as a whole. Similarly, the ambivalence that characterizes Beresford-Howe's treatment of women's roles reflects the quality of ambivalence that feminist theorists repeatedly discover at the heart of women's attitudes towards their roles in patriarchal society. Beresford-Howe's challenge to patriarchy is carried out through her careful, sustained illumination of the experience of individual women in her novels.

The recognition by the Beresford-Howe heroine that she is not merely playing the role of sister, helper, mother, or wife, but that she is in this role meeting her own needs to care, to nurture, to protect, to be secure, to give love and to receive love in return, is central to Beresford-Howe's integrative feminine impulse. The conscious adoption and redefinition of various roles by the female protagonists who inhabit Beresford-Howe's novels are ultimately self-promoting and freeing acts for every woman.

It is my hope that this study will encourage further discussion of Constance Beresford-Howe's novels. Beresford-Howe has been sadly neglected in Canadian academic circles. My own difficulty in finding critical examinations of her work is

testament to this lack. However, studies of the work of other Canadian women novelists have suggested to me many connections that could be made between the feminist concerns of Beresford-Howe and those of better known Canadian women novelists. For instance, Beresford-Howe herself suggests the possibility of a fruitful comparison between her writing and that of Ethel Wilson. Not only does Wilson appear as a significant character in A Serious Widow, but Rowena, the novel's protagonist, also comments that "[Ethel Wilson] shares with me a maverick imagination, often suppressed, but more often subversively active. She is in fact the kind of writer I would be, if I were a writer" (46). Beresford-Howe could well be describing her own "maverick imagination". In addition, several interesting parallels in character, situation, and thematic concerns between the work of Margaret Laurence and Beresford-Howe suggest themselves. To note but a few: A Jest of God (1966) and A Population of One (1977) both deal with isolation through the experience of a spinster schoolteacher; both The Stone Angel (1964) and The Book of Eve (1973) explore the psyche of elderly women; and The Fire-Dwellers (1969) and The Marriage Bed (1981) examine the plight of mothers and suggest ways of redefining motherhood and marriage to empower women. A study of these connections would reveal not only such superficial parallels between plot and character, but might well illuminate underlying similarities in vision and feminist concern. Such a comparative study would contribute enormously to the lack of scholarship on Beresford-Howe, and would certainly be

of interest to both feminist and Canadian literary scholars.

Ultimately, I have sought to examine the work of a Canadian novelist whose writing is not generally known by a critical audience. At the same time, I have attempted to situate Constance Beresford-Howe's novels in the context of contemporary feminist debate. As I argued at the beginning of this study, the ambivalence evident in Beresford-Howe's vacillating attitude toward feminist ideas has been explained by other critics as nothing more than a conservative, reactionary, even anti-feminist, stance. But to me Beresford-Howe's attitude is indicative of an evolving consciousness, given expression through the characters in her novels over half a century, of the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in being a woman. Moreover, the quality of Beresford-Howe's writing demands further exploration of her achievement. Hers is a body of work that deserves our continued serious consideration.

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