

The Cruellest of All Pains: Miscarriage, Abortion and the Female Psyche in Audrey Thomas' "If One Green Bottle . . ." and "The More Little Mummy in the World"

S. Bhuvanewari
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Christ Academy: Institute for Advanced Studies
Bangalore – 560083

Audrey Thomas is one of the leading short fiction writers of Canadian literature. The impact of her literary studies manifests itself in her feminist writing. Image of the lost, abandoned, unloved child unfolds throughout Audrey Thomas' stories through a series of dead babies and lost children. As Godard observes in "Audrey Thomas and her Works," "Most of the stories record some form of loss, some fall from grace perceived through the veil of memory" (219).

The story "If One Green Bottle . . ." centers on the experience of miscarriage. It takes place entirely inside the consciousness of a woman who is in the last hour of her futile labour in a foreign hospital. Her perceptions are quite possibly distorted by the drugs she has been given and her mind dwells naturally on images of birth and death. In her pain and anxiety, the narrator protagonist seeks to identify with another woman's experience: that of the Virgin Mary. She imagines Mary, mother of Christ, first at the Annunciation, where she fantasizes the Holy Ghost as a kind of Door-to-Door Salesman, and then at the birth itself. The figure of the Virgin Mary appears as a symbol of maternity, a uniquely female experience. Mary's experience is neatly caught in a phrase that significantly registers the narrator's loss: "After the immaculate conception . . . the maculate delivery" (TGB 5). This woman is waiting for "the flaming cross," "the olive branch" (9), but all that she remembers is only the "six dead mice" (10) and the formaldehyde bottles of dead fetuses, death intermingled with birth. "Waiting anxiously" (15), she is "Noah" (9) hoping for the sign of a new covenant and forgiveness, some transcendent meaning. In her drugged state, she also identifies with Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Echoing the memory of her father fishing, the narrator compares birth to fishing. She seems obsessed by the idea that once children are “caught” into life, “You cannot throw them back” (*Mrs. Blood* 183). The unborn embryo, like an undersized trout, can be disposed of, but in that case it is “thrown back not to thrive and grow but to become nothing” (183). Her concern over ‘throwing back’ the unborn child looks forward to her impending miscarriage.

“If One Green Bottle . . . ,” is a story of a childbirth that produces ‘nothing.’ As Di Brandt posits, birth is “one of the most amazing and magical moments in human experience, and it belongs, in the case of adults, exclusively to women who become mothers” (8). When this experience turns to nothing, Thomas’ women protagonists find it difficult to come to terms with the loss and the resulting emptiness.

The baby, her potential for life is lost. Her physical emptiness is now generalized to her perception of the spiritual emptiness. The dead child is such a reality to her that she is at the height of her psychological breakdown and self-disassociation following an abortion. She cannot accept that the fetus is taken away and disposed of, to become “nothing, an excrescence” (*Mrs. Blood* 183). The dead infant is described as “A Something in a silver bowl. A Nothing” (219). She rebels against giving birth to “this nothing” (TGB13), and wonders “what do they do with it afterward . . . where will they take it? I have no experience in these matters” (TGB 9). Yet, even in the supposedly more ‘primitive’ atmosphere of Africa, the clinical attitude prevails, and the fetus simply disappears. The narrator of the story thinks of human fetuses stored in bottles on laboratory shelves, to be used for research or teaching purposes, and wonders if this same fate will befall her infant. Indeed, the story’s narrator imagines a male professor using her foetus to teach his class – which is unsympathetic to the woman’s need to deal with what has happened to her child. The mother never finds out what happened to the infant; there are no ceremonies or rituals to help her through her grief. One is, presumably, supposed to act as though the whole thing has never happened. The dead infant underlines the nameless protagonist’s sense of loss, of a real death and grief. And it points out the fact that the foetus is simply disposed of as garbage. This act of discarding the dead child, which denies life, death, and grief, is responsible for much of the narrator’s loss.

In this story Thomas explores pregnancy, a specifically feminine concern. The protagonist suffers an abortion at an indistinct time in her past. This causes her mental pain which she succinctly tucks away, but which resurfaces when she goes through a miscarriage, an event which is coloured linguistically by intense physical pain. (Literally, the death of her unborn child; figuratively, the death of the self). The narrator's identity is unclear throughout much of the story and her stream-of-consciousness narration questions her sanity. The text is entirely composed of fragments, as is the psyche of the emotionally scarred woman. Thomas' women often journey from apparent resolutions to radical questioning and loss of certainty. So to suggest this tale of a woman's disintegration, this fragmentary form is used.

The fragmented narrative, liberally sprinkled with ellipses, is filled with the kind of literary allusions, puns, and etymological explorations. Both overtly, through the narrator's thoughts, and indirectly through its technique, the story deals with the struggles of the protagonist to overcome the loss of her unborn child. As the story follows the meanderings of a woman's mind, past and present mingle, and in the ellipses which break into the text on every line, the waves of her pain, and the waves of memory is sensed:

Waves of pain now . . . positive whitecaps . . . breakers . . . Useless to try to remember . . . to look behind . . . to think. Swim for shore. Ignore the ringing in the ears . . . the eyes half blind with water . . . the waves breaking over the head. Just keep swimming . . . keep moving forward . . . rely on instinct . . . your sense of direction . . . don't look back or forward . . . (TGB 11)

For Thomas, already, memory is a painful act, one which the human swimming tries to avoid in order to make progress; still, it is as inevitable as 'instinct' and source of 'direction' for Thomas' characters as the act of breathing and walking. It is fitting, then, that Thomas herself should navigate as a writer by coming to terms again and again with memory; as she has revealed, "If One Green Bottle . . ." was written out of the intensely painful personal memory of the miscarriage she suffered in Ghana.

The narrator comes to terms with herself through pain, loneliness, fear and guilt. Flashback reconstructs most of her past built up by shifts from present to past and driftings in the stream of semi-consciousness. Concluding in still birth, the brutal memory of an earlier abortion and silence, the

story's final gaps and negations suggest the loss of both her language making power and her potential for life. The ebb and flow of blood emphasizes the ebb and flow of woman's discourse. "If One Green Bottle . . ." is an unusual story: the prose style conveys the controlled hysteria of the narrator, balanced against her need for an almost ruthless exposure of her 'self.'

The experience of maternity, first taken up in this story, is one Audrey Thomas continues to explore throughout her writing, and, that experience is often one of "failed maternity -- a miscarriage or an abortion" (Amussen 63). Abortion is a common image found in her stories. Abortion, perhaps even more than miscarriage, is an experience women find difficult to write or speak about, a loss which they find it very difficult to overcome. Rachel, the protagonist of "The More Little Mummy in the World," is a North American woman travelling alone in Mexico. As she visits a Mexican cemetery and a mummy museum, she recalls her love affair which has just ended and the abortion she has recently had. The abortion appears to have been her own choice; she reflects that "It was as though once she had decided she didn't want it he had washed his hands of the whole affair" (L&E 140). Like the word 'mummy,' the word 'affair' here implies another level of meaning. Her lover washed his hands not just of her pregnancy but also of the entire relationship, a loss which the protagonist finds difficult to bear with.

Abortion becomes the catalyst to the final break-up of the relationship. Rachel's lover treats her with almost unbelievable callousness when he brings her home from the hospital, ignoring her pain and nausea as she leaves the hospital, and asking her when they get home to "rustle ...up some dinner" for himself and his sons before they leave on their camping trip (L&E 145).

Rachel's reaction to "The more little mummy in the world" (145) is reminiscent of the narrator of "If One Green Bottle . . ." thinking of human foetuses stored in laboratory bottles. The infant or foetus on display is depersonalized, turned into an object to be studied or stared at, and this is difficult for the woman who has just lost her child to accept. But Rachel cannot communicate any of this to the man who does not understand her, and so she is reduced to silence: "She wrote him letter after letter and tore them all up" (144).

The postcard she buys at the mummy museum – apparently bearing the picture of "The more little mummy in the world" – provides a means for her to communicate with her ex-lover. She plans to write

the standard postcard message – “Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here” (146). This time-worn cliché is open to a number of possible interpretations, and the picture on the postcard, along with the history of the relationship, will ensure that the phrase conveys a number of different messages for both the sender and the receiver. Rachel is able to break her silence by subverting a traditional means of communication, although, in an ending typical of Audrey Thomas’ short stories, it is not told whether the postcard is ever actually written and mailed. For Thomas’ heroines, the act of sending is more important than whether men receive their messages, for in sending these messages women write themselves into story, naming their experience makes them real. In these live births as in the tragic miscarriages of the other stories, blood remains a key element of the experience, an emblem of all the pain the woman endures and the joy she feels.

Audrey Thomas’ stories, beginning with “If One Green Bottle . . . ,” are attempts to write the female experience, the author’s own experience, of childbirth. Miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion are frequent themes in these stories, partly because these “parodies” of the birth experience, as Thomas has called them (Bowering, *Songs* 15), have often been neglected in literature and Thomas obviously felt a need, both on her own behalf and on that of other women, to write about such events. Such non-births are also appropriate topics because the woman’s labour does not produce the expected, socially acceptable result, the child. The emphasis thus shifts from the product of birth to the often-ignored process of birth. Although in later stories Thomas’ writing shifts away from the experience of childbirth and the loss of it, the emphasis on women’s struggle to overcome their loss and the loneliness caused by it continues.

Works Cited

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