

# PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOND OF SIBLINGS IN COLLEEN MCCULLOUGH'S *BITTERSWEET*.

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## Abstract

A sister can be seen as someone  
who is both ourselves and very much not ourselves – a special kind of double.

--Toni Morrison

The concept of sisterhood has always possessed a mystical allure. Siblings play a unique role in one another's lives that simulates the companionship of parents as well as the influence and assistance of friends. Because they often grow up in the same household, they have a large amount of exposure to one another, like other members of the family. Though a sibling relationship can have both hierarchical and give-and-take elements, this relationship tends to be more egalitarian and consistent with family members.

Furthermore, sibling relationships often reflect the overall condition of cohesiveness within a family. They generally spend more time with each other during childhood than they do with parents or anyone else, and sibling relationships are often the longest-lasting relationship in individuals' lives. This paper explores the relationship and special bond between the siblings of the novel *Bittersweet* written by the notable Australian writer Colleen McCullough.

**Key words:** sisterhood, mystical allure, hierarchical, cohesiveness, siblings.

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Colleen McCullough is an outstanding Australian writer. Her novels are distended with human predicaments that prompt her male and female characters to confront and extricate themselves from those predicaments. Colleen McCullough was born in the year 1937 in a catholic family in Wellington, New South Wales. She spent most of her childhood days in places outside her hometown as her family moved about a great deal. She lived in the areas of Wheat growing, Sheep shearing and sugar growing which later became the background plots of most of her novels, particularly *The Thorn Birds*. She graduated from the University of Sydney. After her graduation, she studied Neurophysiology and worked as a medical technician. McCullough was the founder of the Department of Neurophysiology at the Royal North Shore Hospital of Sydney and she was working there for many years. Later she was invited to the Yale University to work as a research assistant in the department of Neurology in the school of Internal Medicine.

McCullough is a versatile writer of many genres such as Romantic novels, Psychological novels, Dystopia, Historical novels and Detective novels in which she succeeded. She is adept at exploring the true emotional experiences of Australian women under the background of various social conditions and finally reveals the goal of women's real growth and on the other hand she explores the domestic vignettes and work place vendettas too.

McCullough depicts a strong, mutually confiding relationship between sisters in *Bittersweet*. She illustrates their differences in character and disposition, as well as investigates different points of view on the circumstances in the novel. The mutual affection of the four Latimer sisters is shown from the beginning of the novel. Edda, Grace, Tufts and Kitty are the four daughters of Reverend Thomas Latimer. Edda and Grace are the twins of their father's first wife Adelaide, who died during the birth of the twins. Tufts and Kitty are the twins of their father's second wife Maude. Edda, as the strongest and cleverest sister in the novel brings all the sisters close together. The intimacy of the sisters has been frequently noted by everybody in the Rectory. Rather than competing they love each other whole heartedly and care deeply about each other. These vivacious young women each have their own dreams for themselves: Edda wants to be a doctor, Tufts wants to organize everything, Grace won't be told what to do, and Kitty wishes to be known for something other than her beauty.

Siblings may influence one another in much the same way, especially during youth. These relationships may even compensate for the negative psychological impact of not having friends and may provide individuals with a sense of self-worth. Older siblings can effectively model good behaviour for younger siblings. Edda is such a girl who is a paradigm to the three sisters. Equally, all the four Latimer girls are well brought up and they all possess good qualities. They are very close to each other. Kitty is the youngest of all the four girls and she is also very beautiful than the other three girls. Kitty's mother Maude is very proud of her beauty and she uses to din her perfections to all the people she meets. The public's opinion is that Maude is really creating three enemies for Kitty out of her sisters. In general, it may be considered to be true that the three sisters will be very jealous of Kitty if she is given special attention. But the girls love each other and they are afraid that Kitty would become a spoiled and demanding child. So, they always try to shield Kitty from their mother, especially Edda. She has a great concern and love for her sisters.

Clinical psychotherapist Michelle Ambalu explains that siblings are often the first in line even before the parents among those whom children seek out for support in times of need. She explains "During times of significant changes within or disruptions to the family dynamic, a sibling can often take on the

role of the primary attachment figure during childhood ... at a time when the typical primary caregiver is less able to offer this”.

Here, in this novel Edda is the primary attachment figure for Kitty when her primary caregiver, Maude hurts her. When Kitty is not able to tolerate her mother’s annoying behaviour when she is ten years old, she begins to hit Edda with a cheese grater. Edda, instead of hurting her back, takes her to their father who, out of his kindest and sweetest words persuades Kitty to be a nice girl. Whenever Kitty gets hurt, Edda is readily there for consolation. Being a step sister to Kitty, Edda does not treat Kitty as one, but loves her a lot like her own.

Edda is a primary attachment figure not only for Kitty, but for Grace and Tufts too. She shares a special bond between all the three girls. Her only wish is to save all the three girls, including her from their mother Maude. She is the one who persuades all the girls to join the new style nursing course. The three younger girls have different dreams of their own which they know, will be rejected by their mother and father. Edda persuades the three girls to study nursing for three years and after their registration, they could pursue their dreams. When Grace starts to cry, on seeing the cottage provided for them during nursing training, it is Edda who persuades her to be silent and dream of the future.

When the four girls are fed up with bad food, ill-treatment of the west end nurses, provision of cut - up newspapers for toilet papers, facing words from nurses which are excluded from their vocabulary. Edda holds them together and convinces them by saying, “Remember that we are Latimers. What upsets today will be old hat tomorrow – don’t let them beat us! No tears and no down in the dumps”. (*Bittersweet*)

The attachment theory which is used to describe an infant’s relationship to a primary caregiver may also be applied to siblings. “If an infant finds an older sibling to be responsive and sees him or her as a source of comfort, a supportive bond may form”.

Grounded in the early writings of John Bowlby, attachment theory purports to explain developmental changes, but primarily individual differences, in social relationships. This perspective targets the early bond between infants and their primary caregivers as critical to the infants’ survival.

By virtue of their characteristics and behaviors (e.g., crying, clinging), infants promote proximity to their caregivers, beginning in the first days of life. As children develop, in the second year, the attachment figure can become a secure base from which children explore the world around them but return to in stressful circumstances for comfort and a sense of security. (Bowlby)

McCullough's focus on the characters of Edda Kitty and Maude outfits the attachment theory. The four Latimer girls are individually different and have got different dreams in their life. When Maude starts to hurt Kitty, all the three girls stand beside her and try to shield her from their mother. This sense of attachment continues even when they become matured and when they are able to handle things on their own.

From this theoretical perspective, the nature of the relationship with a primary attachment figure, most often the mother, becomes the basis for an internal working model of relationships, that is, individuals' expectations, understanding, emotions, and behaviors surrounding their interpersonal relationships as a whole. From this perspective, children's relationships with a primary caregiver have long-term implications for the qualities of their sibling relationships: Emotionally secure caregiver-child relationships are thought to lead to close and trusting relationships with others, whereas insecure relationships may lead to conflictual, distant, or otherwise fewer satisfying relationships, including with siblings.

In many cases, older siblings may take on the role of an attachment figure or a secure base for younger siblings. For example, a sibling attachment bond may be evidenced by an older sibling who facilitates exploration or provides comfort during a distressing situation when the primary caregiver is unavailable (Samuels, 1980; Stewart, 1983; Teti & Ablard, 1989).

This theory is very apt for the younger Latimer girls. They all consider Edda as their attachment figure whenever they need her. When Grace informs that she is in love and she is very confident in marrying a man whom she met only once, Edda, Tufts and Kitty are equally worried and Edda says, "Grace, Grace, it doesn't happen like that!". Tufts reaction is, "How about finishing nursing first? You'd

have something to fall back on in times of need, Grace”. Kitty’s reaction is sounding affectionate, “Not before you give your sisters a chance to inspect him.” (*Bittersweet*)

All these reactions show us the caring and attachment of the four siblings. Equally important from an attachment perspective is that, in addition to their primary caregiver, children can form attachments to a range of familiar others in their social worlds. And given their ubiquity in everyday life during childhood and adolescence, siblings are prime candidates for attachment relationships. Early in life, the need for a sense of security means that attachment relationships are based on others’ responsiveness to infants’ needs, and thus sensitive and involved older siblings may become objects of attachment.

Finally, the importance to sibling relationships is the idea that, with maturity, individuals increasingly form mutual and reciprocal relationships, wherein each partner’s responsiveness to the needs of the other becomes important. In this way, siblings’ behaviors toward each other may exert an influence on the sibling relationship, with each sibling’s working model influencing the creation of an attachment relationship between them. McCullough focuses on the value of the relationships of the siblings and their ability to shape themselves and grow morally. She has created the characters of siblings who move towards their dreams, facing difficulties in their paths and gaining stronger morality. The special bonds when shared with siblings, can help each other through tough times,



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