

The Motherless Daughter: An Evolving Archetype of Adolescent Literature

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The orphan has long been used as a device in adolescent literature to allow child protagonists to have wondrous adventures that would be stymied by the constraints of parents. Charles Dickens created a plethora of orphans whose parentless state allowed him to explore political, social and ethical issues of the time period. In *The Outsiders*, Ponyboy and his brothers lose their parents in an automobile accident. The boys band together to avoid the threat of foster parents who would change their lives. The parentless child remained a plot device. Often these parentless boys embark on journeys that lead them to maturity. The emotions accompanying such a loss were subtly alluded to but mostly ignored. Only in the past decade have we seen a marked change in how adolescent literature examined the emotional complexities of grief and loss, particularly for adolescent girls.

People are uncomfortable discussing grief. During the 1900s, a great silence settled on the subject of death (Aries, 1974). Though Edna St. Vincent Millay once identified childhood as "the kingdom where nobody dies," our students witness thousands of deaths each year on television, while few explore bereavement. The classroom is no exception. Through a student's schooling, teachers read tragic stories from *Charlotte's Web* to *Romeo and Juliet*. Yet, we do not deal with the aftermath of loss. We do not teach our students how to mourn for Charlotte the spider or Johnny Cade and Dally Winston or Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet. We silently close the book and move on. Our students who suffer personal tragedies have few models from which to draw in addressing their own sorrow. However, in the 1990s, a remarkable trend began in adolescent literature: an exploration of the nature of the grieving process in adolescents.

In this article, we focus on how adolescent literature can enable students to examine the specific experience of the motherless daughter. We acknowledge that the discussion of the death of a mother causes discomfort and resistance in some. While these adolescent novels are not the only titles on the topic, we feel they are powerful in reducing the threat of the situation and prompting meaningful dialogue. Each novel has been recognized as superior. We have each taught these books in middle school classrooms and found them to have merit. We will look at these novels in the chronological order of publication to see the evolution of the archetype of the motherless daughter from the 1960s to the present day. In addition, we will be utilizing the work of texts on grief and

loss and how they relate to the motherless daughter to examine the nature of both bereavement and acceptance as explored in adolescent literature.

Julie of the Wolves (1973)

In Jean Craighead George's absorbing novel, *Julie of the Wolves*, Julie's mother died when Julie was but four years old. The character of the mother and her impact on Julie are only briefly discussed. In a short passage that opens Part II of the novel, Julie recalls a walk with her father on the day of her mother's death. She recollects not being sad, but rather being happy to be with her father. She remembers how her father said that the cries of the animals sounded as if they were grieving with him.

In *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss*, Hope Edelman notes that young children do not have the understanding to deal with death. They do not understand the loss or the process of grief. Their bereavement process is often protracted. They often must wait to grieve until the surviving parent has mourned. Only then can the child grieve safely (1995). George acknowledges this through Julie's actions in the Newbery Award-winning novel. Her anger is directed at her aunt.

Edelman explains that a motherless daughter chooses a woman as a replacement figure. Instead of detaching from her lost mother, a daughter may try to quickly and directly transfer her feelings of dependency, her needs, and her expectations onto the nearest available adult. The woman can be a relative, a teacher, or a family friend who plays a strong role in the child's development. During adolescence, the motherless daughter will then rebel and gain autonomy from this woman. For Julie, that person is her aunt Martha. In early adolescence, Julie escapes from her aunt's home into an arranged marriage.

Yet, no effort is made in the text to further explicitly examine Julie's grief for the loss of her mother. She is only mentioned in passing. The text concludes with Julie's desire to reconcile with her father. The death of Julie's mother essentially remains a plot device to free the character for a wilderness adventure. Julie's grief is silenced.

Sarah, Plain and Tall (1985)

Anna, 11, is one of the few motherless daughters in adolescent literature who is not an only child. She is the older

sister to Caleb. Edelman states that a motherless daughter who is also the oldest child assumes the role of family historian. Patricia MacLachlan's poignant novel, *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, opens with Anna recounting the story of Caleb's birth and their mother's subsequent death. Caleb is listening and offering details, indicating that Anna has told this story many times before.

The role of family historian is only one in a pattern of service this motherless daughter accepts. Edelman reminds us that early loss is a maturing experience. Another pattern of service is the daughter's assumption of her mother's role in the household, since no other older female relative exists to assume the tasks. Set in the prairie of the late 19th century, the story shows Anna labors in the home, undertaking many of the chores of her late mother.

MacLachlan does little to explore Anna's emotions regarding her mother's demise. In the opening passage, Anna ends her account of her brother's birth with her mother's dying words, "Is he beautiful?" Caleb answers for Anna, "And I was" (1985, 4). But Anna secretly and vehemently disagrees. She tells herself that he was homely and plain. He had a terrible holler and a horrid smell. She remembers going to bed thinking of how wretched he looked. In this sequence, we get a hint of the rage Anna feels about the death of her mother. Following this moment, Anna's grief, like Julie's in *Julie of the Wolves*, remains silent. It becomes secondary to the story of the arrival of Sarah Wheaton from Maine and her romance with Anna's father. For a long period, the cultural norm has been for the bereaved to be silent and move on (Stephenson 1985). Much adolescent literature prior to the 1990s reinforced this concept by keeping grief felt by protagonists unspoken.

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Walk Two Moons (1994)

Salamanca Hiddle lost her mother in a bus accident when she was twelve. Shortly after the death, Salamanca's father plucked her up like a weed and the two of them moved three hundred miles away to begin a new life. However, she has no interest living in a neighborhood of tiny homes jammed together like birdhouses. Nor is she interested in the stiffly dressed kids at her new school. She especially has no interest in knowing her father's fond new acquaintance, Margaret Cadaver. Sal simply wants everything to be like it was.

Sharon Creech's landmark story, *Walk Two Moons*, unfolds as Salamanca takes a week-long road trip with her grandparents to follow the steps of her mother's journey; a trip that ultimately leads to the site of Mrs. Hiddle's demise. It is a trip her father had made alone nearly twelve months earlier. Now it is Salamanca's turn to acknowledge the death of her mother.

The grieving process in adolescence is frequently characterized by an attack of emotions including fear, resentment, abandonment, guilt, and anger (Edelman, 1995). Creech's development of Salamanca's character allows her to illustrate

these feelings. For instance, Sal is afraid. When she and her father move to Euclid, the first thing she does is to unpack all of the gifts and remembrances from her mother and display them around the room. Without them, Sal fears the memory of her mother will disappear completely. Salamanca's fear continues to be seen as she suggests the journey with her grandparents is a trip she is not eager to take, but one she has to take. In fact, even though her grandparents describe the jaunt as an opportunity to "see the whole ding-dong country," Sal only wants to see her momma but acknowledges that she is also afraid.

In addition to her fear, Salamanca is angry, especially at the relationship developing between her father and Margaret Cadaver. Creech often characterizes Sal as feeling "particularly ornery" and accentuates the awareness of her behavior. She tells the reader, "Whenever anyone tried to console me about my mother, I had nearly chomped their heads off." Although she feels miserable and lost, she will never admit it. Instead, Salamanca feels she has to cry by herself.

Edelman explains ornery behavior like Salamanca's by reminding us that mourning hurts. It requires these girls to take a risk, to lose control of emotions. In order to take this risk, they need to feel a safety from the remaining parent who has already begun the healing process. Therefore, adolescent girls begin to grieve six to nine months after the death of their mother. Not until Salamanca visits the site of her mother's grave a year later that she is able to face her sorrow and begin to move toward acceptance. In fact, Salamanca buries her grief as she remains in denial about her mother's death.

Psychologist Judith Mishne writes, "The avoidance of the finality of the loss is supported by fantasies of the parents return" ("Parental Abandonment," 1987, 17). In the same way, Salamanca tells us, "When my mother did not return, I imagined all sorts of things. Maybe she had cancer and didn't want to tell us and was hiding in Idaho. Maybe she got knocked on the head and had amnesia and was wandering around Lewiston, not knowing who she was, or thinking she was someone else." Salamanca needs to feel that her mother is coming back and refuses to believe her father saying those reasons are "fishes in the air."

Even when the journey to Idaho begins, Sal expresses an extreme urgency in getting to Lewiston by her mother's birthday so they would have a chance at bringing her home. "I had been praying that a miracle would happen and my mother would come back and we would return to Bybanks and everything would be exactly as it used to be." But once Salamanca saw the wreckage of the accident, she knew things would never be the same. When Salamanca finally returns to Bybanks, she learns that she can still live on the farm, she still climb the sugar maple tree, and she can still miss her mother, too.

A Girl Named Disaster (1996)

In *A Girl Named Disaster*, Nancy Farmer's engrossing tale of a young girl's maturation in the rural Africa of Zimbabwe

and later Mozambique, we are shown how one motherless daughter utilizes idealization of the deceased as a normal response to loss. The tragic death of Nhamo's mother, Runako, haunts her daughter. A leopard killed Runako when Nhamo was three years old. The animal came into the hut, struck, and dragged the young mother's lifeless body back into the jungle.

The bereaved move toward acceptance when they can visualize the face of the deceased at peace. Virginia Woolf, who was thirteen when her mother died, wrote, "Youth and death shed a halo through which it is difficult to see a real face" (A Sketch of the Past 15).

Nhamo cannot recall her mother's face. She supplements her mother's face with that of a model in an advertisement torn from a magazine. The woman, clean and well dressed, is serving margarine and bread to a little girl. Nhamo treasures the picture. She speaks to it daily as if her mother were still alive. Rather than surmising her mother's face looks like one of the weather-beaten women of her village, Nhamo idealizes her mother as having the features of a magazine model. Edelman writes that because girls love their mothers they want them to be flawless when they lived. Girls honor their mothers by granting them posthumous perfection, and soothe themselves by creating the mothers they wish they had. One of the key reasons mothers cannot be replaced when they are gone is that there is confusion as to who is missed – the ideal mother or the real one (Davidman 2000).

Though deceased, Runako plays a vital role in a novel where spirits can and do converse with the living. When Nhamo is forced to flee her village in a leaking fishing boat and becomes lost on a great lake, she freely converses with her mother's spirit who responds. Nhamo hears her mother's voice as "sweet and low" (Farmer, 1996, 293). This is an idealized voice that would match the appearance of a model in a magazine advertisement. Later, after a severe illness, Nhamo comes to believe a female doctor is her mother, because of the physician's resemblance to the model in the advertisement. Nhamo transfers her mother's identity to the woman who cares for her during an illness. This idealized maternal figure is highly intelligent, a quality Runako was said to have possessed.

Only when Nhamo sees a photograph of her mother and hears the true story of Runako's life is Nhamo able to separate the image of her mother from the advertisement and to come to terms with her grief. Nhamo has established herself as an independent person without feeling she has abandoned the memory of her mother.

Out of the Dust (1997)

A daughter who is an only child suffers a different loss when her mother dies. Because she received more attention from her mother, her loss is greater, according to Edelman. That is true in Karen Hesse's remarkable novel, *Out of the Dust*.

The novel, written in first person, free verse poems, follows 14-year-old Billie Jo Kelby through a journey of healing that begins with her mother's accidental, yet horrific death. Set in the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, the community holds both Billie Jo and her father jointly responsible.

After the death of the mother, the relationship between a father and his only child changes. Billie Jo comments, "I don't

know my father anymore . . . I am awkward and irritated . . . We are both changing. We are shifting to fill in the empty spaces left by Ma." The effort is not successful. A nurturing, caring, unconditionally loving mother is so central to our idea of family that it is virtually impossible to have a family without her (Davidman 2000).

Sometimes motherless daughters feel the impulse to become perfect so their father won't leave them too. During her first Christmas without her mother, Billie Jo aches that she never had mother teach her to make a special cranberry sauce. Billie Jo laments that being there without her mother would not have been so bad if she had remembered the cranberry sauce her father so enjoyed. In reality, it is not cranberry sauce that is creating distance between father and daughter.

The death of her mother has left Billie Jo and her father alone. Not knowing how to cope with the death, their relationship begins to disintegrate. Edelman reminds us that a child who loses a parent cannot exist alone emotionally without significant cost. Billie Jo desperately yearns for her father's love, but they no longer know how to talk with one another. Billie Jo states, "My father and I, we can't soothe each other. I'm too young, he's too old, and we don't know how to talk anymore if we ever did" (Hesse 153).

Time progresses and the relationship diminishes further. "I have given my father so many chances to understand, to reach out, to love me. He once did. I remember his smile, his easy talk. Now there's nothing easy between us" (Hesse 195).

Ultimately Billie Jo leaves her father. Unable to find solace, this motherless daughter hopes to abandon her loneliness when she latches on to an abandoned boxcar and heads west. She is not gone long. During her journey, Billie Jo learns a life on the road is even more lonely than the life at home. Upon her return, she and her father begin to find healing, acceptance, peace, and forgiveness:

As we walk together,
side by side,
in the swell of dust,
I am forgiving him, step by step,
for the pail of kerosene.
As we walk together,
side by side,
in the sole-deep dust,
I am forgiving myself
for the rest.

(*Out of the Dust* 206)

Dancing on the Edge (1997)

Suicide brings with it a legacy of confusion, guilt, blame, hostility, stigma and feelings of rejection. Social stigma compounds problems created by a suicide. The potent mechanism of denial may prompt the bereaved to unconsciously create acceptable stories. That is all true for Miracle McCloy.

In a book that is controversial for its inclusion of Ouija boards and self-immolation, the effort undertaken by this motherless daughter to find inner peace is profound. Named by her maternal grandmother Gigi, Miracle was born immediately after her mother was killed. Sissy, nine months pregnant, was struck by an ambulance. "It didn't seem natural, a

live baby coming out of the dead body of a dead woman. Gigi said it was the greatest miracle ever to come down the pike," reads the opening passage of Han Nolan's powerful novel, *Dancing on the Edge* (3).

Children who have lost their mothers feel they no longer have a stable foundation in their lives (Davidman 2000). The narrative of this novel follows Miracle as she leads an unconventional life filled with isolation and unspoken grief. Her father leaves one night during Miracle's first attempt to connect with her dead mother's spirit using the Ouija board. The grandmother Gigi denies the truth of her son's departure as a rejection of her. She creates a fanciful tale that has Dane vanishing in the flames of the candles in his basement bedroom.

Miracle grieves the loss of both her dead mother and absent father until her torment is extreme. She sets herself afire to follow her father. While hospitalized and partaking in therapy, Miracle confronts the truth of her mother's death:

I saw Mama sad, the way she was in the picture of her on the iron gate. I saw her standing on the side of the street looking down the road to check for traffic. I saw her watching the ambulance, waiting for it to pass, its siren screaming, blocking out her own thoughts, her ability to reason, there wasn't time. There was just the screaming siren, the speeding truck, there was no time to think, she just did it, she stepped in front of the ambulance. She let it hit her, I saw it. I knew how it was. I had always known. I had always known! (*Dancing on the Edge* 217).

Children grieve differently than adults. Their process is lengthened, extending throughout their development as their cognitive and emotional abilities mature. Miracle and some of our students cannot address the death of their mothers before they are ready. Yet, as Edelman suggests, all ties, both positive and negative, have to be evaluated before a daughter can reconcile her mother's death and move on.

There is no more suitable time to discuss the concept of forgiveness than in the wake of a suicide. This is the teachable moment. Students can learn to forgive the deceased and forgive themselves for any guilt they may hold. This is critical to the healing process. Later Miracle proclaims, "I didn't need Mama to make me feel real . . . I was real . . . It was knowing the truth – all of it. The truth made me real" (*Dancing on the Edge* 234).

Girlhearts (2001)

In her landmark research and subsequent writings about death and dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified the five stages of grief and loss – anger, denial, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross 1969). Award-winning author Norma Fox Mazer sends 13-year-old Sarabeth Silver on a journey through these stages following the untimely fatal heart attack of her 29-year-old mother, Jane Halley Silver.

Sarabeth changes following the death of her mother. "You're not the person you used to be. Jane would cry to see

you," warns Cynthia, Sarabeth's mother's best friend, and now Sarabeth's temporary guardian (*Girlhearts* 157).

Others notice the change. Her friend Patty, a sexual abuse survivor, tells Sarabeth, "You're all closed up; you're like a room with no doors and no windows" (*Girlhearts* 150).

The character of Chester Jay Travisino, Sarabeth's social worker, allows Mazer to speak directly to the grieving process and specifically to issues of anger present in one suffering from grief and loss:

This 'yeah, yeah' stuff is telling me you're depressed. You're mad, really mad. And we both know why. You're mad at your mother for dying. Simple as that. Listen you can admit it. Nobody'll put you in jail for being angry about her deserting you. (*Girlhearts* 93)

Through the narrative, Sarabeth does confront her anger, as well as her denial, her depression, and ultimately her acceptance. In the closing of the novel, Sarabeth has a dream of her mother. They share a moment together. Finally Sarabeth acknowledges the realization that she will never forget her mother nor will her mother forget her. "And the happiness I felt was extraordinary."

Traditionally we shield children from the grim finality of death. *Girlhearts* does not shield the adolescent reader from Sarabeth's raw emotions. Kübler-Ross spent her life writing about how death shapes experience. Advocating that children should not be hidden from a friend or a family member who is dying, she writes, "If we shield the canyons from the winds, we would never know the beauty of their carvings" (Kübler-Ross xix).

Conclusion

In *Motherless Daughters*, Phyllis Silverman, M.D., director of the Child Bereavement Study at Massachusetts General Hospital, stated that asking girls to sever ties to the past may only confound bereavement. When one loses her mother, the intervals between grief responses lengthen over time, but the longing never disappears. Edelman explains that grief always hovers at the edge of her awareness, prepared to surface at any time, in any place in the least expected ways.

As educators, we have choices. Many novels we teach begin or end in death. We can opt to turn away from those students who grieve and dismiss their emotion as the result of effective storytelling. Traditionally we shield children from the grim finality of death. Those who work with children confronted by death tell us that this is an error.

Girls enveloped in grief and loss feel anger, denial, and depression. Purposefully or not, we encourage denial. Societal rules regarding anger are different for young men than young women. Young women who exhibit rage are not in keeping with the traditional feminine behavior of many cultures. An adolescent who has lost the primary female role model in her life wants to conform. She wants the other females in her life to like her. The teenage girl who thinks her mother's absence will make her appear different or abnormal will often avoid talking about the loss or revealing any anger

or depression to her friends. The motherless daughter is also coping with rejection. "My mother left me." The argument is not rational, but the feeling of rejection is real.

The notion exists that grief is a finite process that can be resolved (Davidman 2000). Grief does not end. Motherless daughters revisit their loss at significant moments in their lives – graduation, awards night, first date, a break up with a serious boyfriend, birthdays, Mother's Day. The motherless daughter misses her mother at these and other significant moments.

No one story should be expected to offer a complete philosophy, to portray all the stages of grief and adherence to the "typical" set of circumstances (Radley, 1999). Literary characters can provide experiences and actions to guide readers to empathy or to model positive choices. As educators, we have the opportunity of enriching the study of adolescent literature by expanding into the realm of profound relevancy for not only those students who address grief and loss in their lives but every student by providing a greater depth of understanding of bereavement and acceptance – the reality of death, the importance of connecting with others, the power of forgiveness, the ability to feel joy without guilt, and the freedom of truth.

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