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What Happened to Mother?: Patriarchy, Oppression, and Reconciliation in Janet Fitch's White Oleander

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WHAT HAPPENED TO MOTHER? PATRIARCHY, OPPRESSION, AND RECONCILIATION IN JANET FITCH’S WHITE OLEANDER

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .......................................................... Page iv

1. Patriarchy....................................................... Page 1
2. Double Oppression ............................................ Page 14
3. Fantasy Mother ................................................ Page 21
4. Reconciliation with the Mother .............................. Page 29

REFERENCES ......................................................... Page 38

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ........................................... Page 40
ABSTRACT

Janet Fitch’s White Oleander is a complex novel that on the surface appears to be about Astrid’s journey from one foster home to the next. The complexity of the novel, however, lies within the relationships between Astrid and the women in her world and how these relationships are actually framed by the men in the novel. The tensions among the women in White Oleander are especially, though not exclusively, a consequence of their relationships with men. The first chapter examines the role that patriarchy plays in the novel and the effect it has on the women. The second chapter analyzes the notion of double oppression. Double oppression occurs in White Oleander insofar as the male characters oppress the female characters, and in return the female characters displace their oppression onto Astrid. In the third chapter, I discuss the notion of fantasy mother and how Fitch depicts the fantasy mother in White Oleander. In the last chapter, I examine the reconciliation process between Astrid and Ingrid.
Patriarchy is a controlling force in *White Oleander*. According to Caroline Ramazanoglu, patriarchy “encapsulates the mechanisms, ideology and social structures which have enabled men throughout much of human history to gain and to maintain their domination over women” (Ramazanoglu 33).¹ In this chapter, I argue that patriarchy is the underlying theme in the sections concerning Ingrid, Starr, Olivia, and Claire. I focus on these four women because they are the most prominent women in the novel who act as a mother-figure for Astrid. The women’s relationships are extensively framed by their relationships with men. Although the women in *White Oleander* deal with patriarchy differently, men oppress them all, both overtly and more indirectly.

Ingrid’s fight against patriarchy is the underlying theme in the first section of the book. From the beginning, the reader witnesses Ingrid’s internal struggle against patriarchy. Ingrid’s choice to raise Astrid as a single mother is an example of Ingrid’s opposition to patriarchy; by raising Astrid without

a father, Ingrid takes on the role of mother and father, thus giving her more power and control over Astrid. Although Ingrid believes that Astrid does not need a male father-figure, she fails to understand Astrid’s need for a father. Astrid, curious about her father, asks Ingrid where he is. Ingrid replies:

“You have no father”

“Everybody has a father,” I said.

“Fathers are irrelevant. Believe me, you’re lucky. I had one, I know. Just forget it” (Fitch 26).

The importance of this scene is twofold: (1) Ingrid decides for Astrid that Astrid does not need a father; thus, she is exercising a form of control over Astrid (I examine this idea in chapters 2 and 4) and (2) the lack of a father-figure foreshadows Astrid’s desire to be loved by men.

Moreover, Ingrid fights patriarchy by trying to protect herself and Astrid from men. Ingrid recalls their heritage:

“We received our coloring from Norsemen,” she [Ingrid] said. “Hairy savages who hacked their gods to pieces and hung the flesh from trees. We are the ones who sacked Rome. Fear only feeble age and death in bed. Don’t forget who you are.” (Fitch 4)

Ingrid explains to Astrid that their Nordic heritage calls for them to be fighters. By calling on their heritage, Ingrid reminds Astrid that they must resist oppression through any means, including the use of violence.

Ingrid’s internal fight against patriarchy becomes externalized when she develops a relationship with Barry. Internally, Ingrid realizes her passion for men, and therefore she sets rules she must abide to, such as: “‘Never let a man stay the night,’ she told me [Astrid]. ‘Dawn has a way of casting a pall on any night magic’” (Fitch 6). The notion of creating rules for herself when it comes to men demonstrates
Ingrid’s awareness of the effects that men can have on her. When Ingrid meets Barry she begins to let her guard down and breaks some of her own rules, such as letting Barry stay the night. Passion then begins to take over Ingrid; she becomes intoxicated by Barry:

His voice was cloves and nightingales, it took us to spice markets in the Celebes, we drifted with him on a houseboat beyond the Coral Sea. We were like cobras following a reed flute. (Fitch 21)

The imagery that Astrid uses to describe Barry is important to note because the word “drifted” suggests that Ingrid and Astrid are in a dreamlike state when they are with Barry, allowing him to lead them to unknown places. Furthermore, by comparing Ingrid and Astrid to cobras, Astrid actually foreshadows Barry’s murder: similar to a cobra, Ingrid stalks and kills her prey — in this case, Barry.

As Ingrid’s and Barry’s relationship progresses, Ingrid’s stoicism becomes frayed. Astrid comments: “she spent an hour trying on clothes, white Indian pajamas, the blue gauze dress, the pineapples and hula girls. I’d never seen her so indecisive” (Fitch 21). Here, Astrid describes the change that occurs within Ingrid; as Ingrid begins to allow Barry to become a part of their lives, she becomes less decisive and secure. One of the most important changes Astrid notes about her mother is when Astrid describes Ingrid’s reaction to a picture that was taken of Barry and Ingrid:

They both look bombed. The caption dubbed her Barry’s new lady love. It was exactly the kind of thing she hated the most, a woman as a man’s anything. Now it was as if she’d won a contest. (Fitch 24)

Here, Ingrid accepts, and even seems pleased, that she is pictured as Barry’s new lady. Before, this would have been
unacceptable; but now she fully accepts it. Furthermore, Ingrid’s passion obscures the fact that only her picture is shown - her name is never mentioned, thus furthering the notion that she is presented as Barry’s property. Ingrid’s passion for Barry obscures her reasoning that women are not the property of men; instead, she appears to be proud of the fact that her name and picture are linked with the famous Barry Kolker.

More importantly, as Ingrid’s passion for Barry increases, her power over the relationship decreases. When Barry first pursues Ingrid, Ingrid controls the relationship; however, after Barry won, he controls their relationship - including when the relationship ended. The loss of power combined with her passion leads Ingrid to murder Barry. Although Ingrid is convicted of murder, she is considered a heroine in feminist circles because she fought the patriarchal system. In a letter to Astrid, Ingrid writes: “However, she believes me to be a prisoner of the patriarchy, a martyr in my own small way” (Fitch 153). Moreover, after Ingrid successfully beats the judicial system, she is offered multiple teaching positions, reaffirming the notion that she is revered because she fought, and beat, her oppressors.

After Ingrid’s arrest, Astrid, at the age of thirteen, becomes part of the welfare system and is sent to various foster homes and children centers. The first foster mother Astrid lives with is Starr. Whereas Ingrid’s fight against patriarchy is more an internal struggle to protect herself and Astrid from men, Starr’s battle against patriarchy is more external. It leads her to become competitive against women, especially

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2 Ingrid’s passion for Barry does not go unnoticed by Astrid. Says Astrid: “Passion. I never imagined it was something that could happen to her. These were days she couldn’t recognize herself in a mirror, her eyes black with it, her hair tangled and smelling of musk, Barry’s goat scent” (Fitch 25).
Astrid. Unlike Ingrid, Starr flaunts her sexuality deliberately to attract men. Astrid describes Starr:

When she spoke, Starr moved her whole body, throwing her head back to laugh. A small gold cross glittered between her breasts, and the caseworker couldn’t keep his eyes off that deep secret place. (Fitch 50)

The preceding description of Starr shows how Starr uses her body to receive attention from men, hence, her former job as a topless waitress. Furthermore, Starr’s beauty is unnatural: “She opened her eyes wide, I could see the glue on her false eyelashes” (Fitch 55). The falseness of Starr’s beauty parallels her false religious beliefs. Not only is there a sense of falseness in Starr’s religiosity, but her actions also contradict her religious beliefs.³

Starr, who uses her sexuality as a tool to get what she wants from men, also tries to get Astrid to do the same. For example, Starr takes Astrid shopping for clothing and only recommends clothing that she would wear, never asking Astrid what she wants.⁴ Astrid comments: “I could only look at her in the mirror, her breasts falling out of the top of her underwired brassiere, the cross hiding between them like a snake in a rock”

³ According to Chris Wheedon, “with the establishment of Christianity as the dominant religion in the West, God becomes exclusively male and pre-Christian goddesses who symbolize fertility, sexuality and power are replaced by the image of the virgin mother, an image which denies women’s sexuality, power and fecundity” (32). Wheedon’s claim is relevant in understanding the contradiction in Starr’s religious beliefs. Starr uses sexuality for both power and pleasure but claims that she accepts Christ as her savior; thus Starr’s actions contradict her stated beliefs.

⁴ Astrid does, however, explicitly ask for hiking boots:

I decided on a pair of hiking boots, hoping they weren’t too expensive. Starr looked pained when I showed them to her. “They’re not very...flattering.”

But snakes rarely struck above the ankle. (Fitch 56).

Here, Astrid specifically picks something out on her own, but she senses Starr’s disapproving tone. The importance of this quotation lies in the fact that Astrid believes she needs to protect herself from snakes, or from those who might lash out against her.
Here, Astrid uses an image of a snake when describing Starr. The snake imagery foreshadows Starr’s attack against Astrid: similar to a snake hiding in the rocks, Starr hides behind her jealousy and strikes unexpectedly to kill Astrid.\(^5\) Too, the use of the cross to symbolize the force that confronts the snake further demonstrates Starr’s view on religion. In other words, the snake also represents the trickery of the serpent in Genesis; like the serpent, Starr tricks Astrid into believing that she had a safe home. More importantly, the cross hiding between Starr’s breast glorifies the hypocrisy of Starr’s purported religious beliefs.

The relationship between Starr and Astrid worsens when Astrid develops a relationship with Ray. Ingrid warns Astrid to avoid Ray: “You stay away from Uncle Ray, especially if he’s oh so nice” (Fitch 67). Ingrid is aware of the danger that Ray can inflict on Astrid; but more importantly, Ingrid’s warning is also a form of protection. On the other hand, Starr does not try to protect Astrid from Ray; instead, she views Astrid as competition and wants her out of the house. During a conversation with Astrid, Starr warns:

“He’s a man, missy. He sees what he sees and he does what he can. I’ve go to talk fast before he gets back, but I got to tell you, I decided I’m calling Children’s Services, so whatever you were thinking, it’s all over now, Baby Blue. You’re history.”....

Don’t try to argue me out of it. I got a nice thing going here now. Ray’s the best man I ever had, treats me nice. Maybe you haven’t trying, but I smell S-E-X, missy, and I’m not taking any chances. I lived too long and come too far to blow it now.” (Fitch 88-89)

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\(^5\) Fitch uses similar snake imagery when she compares Ingrid and Astrid
This passage demonstrates the competitiveness that Starr feels towards Astrid. Starr does not try to protect Astrid from Ray, even though Astrid is only a child and Ray is an adult. Instead, Starr views Astrid as a threat believing Astrid is looking to steal Ray from her.

According to bell hooks, "male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men" (hooks 43). Furthermore, hooks asserts: "we [women] are taught that women are ‘natural’ enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another" (hooks 43). hooks’ claims are relevant to the theme of patriarchy within White Oleander, especially as it relates to Starr. Starr’s happiness depends on whether Ray is in her life. As soon as a threat develops that Ray and Astrid are having an affair, Starr begins to drink and misses her Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. She also becomes verbally and physically abusive to her biological and foster children; for Starr, her relationship with Ray is more important than her children and health. Starr also views Astrid as an enemy because of the threat that Ray may prefer Astrid to Starr. Thus, Starr views Astrid as a competitor and not as a daughter. Although Starr’s fears come to fruition, Starr still places the majority of the blame on Astrid, choosing to shoot Astrid and only verbally assaults Ray. Starr’s actions reinforce the notion that Starr chooses to align herself with men and against women.

to cobras. See above, page 3.

6 Caroline Ramazanoglu agrees with hooks. Ramazanoglu posits: “Understanding the full range of women’s lives has entailed looking not only at women’s oppression by men, but also at women’s solidarity with men, and at women’s oppression by women” (93). In other words, Ramazanoglu argues that not only are women victims of oppression by men, but women are also oppressed by women; especially when race, class ethnicity, sexuality, and culture become involved (93).

8 Starr shoots Astrid with a .38 in a drunken rage after discovering
Episodes at Astrid’s second foster home, the Turlocks, introduce the reader to Olivia Johnstone, a highly paid prostitute. Astrid is mesmerized by Olivia’s elegance: “…a striking black woman in a white linen suit. I’d only seen her a couple of times, picking up her magazines, leaving her house in the evening in silk and pearls” (Fitch 133). Astrid is awestruck by the grace and elegance that Olivia embodies. In contrast, Marvel Turlock views Olivia as trash: ‘‘That damn whore. Thinks she’s the Duchess of Windsor. Makes me want to puke’’ (Fitch 133). Furthermore, Marvel asserts:

“Don’t you ever let me catch you talking to her,” she said to me. “Christ, I remember when this was a good neighborhood. Now it’s the blacks and the whores, chinks and beaners with chickens in the yard. I mean, what next?” (Fitch 133)

In this passage, Marvel aligns herself against Olivia, commenting on Olivia’s professional job as a prostitute. Marvel not only judges Olivia; she also makes racist comments about her Hispanic and black neighbors. These comments reinforce hooks’ belief that women need to align with one another and not against each other.

Ingrid, too, criticizes Olivia’s behavior and chosen profession. In a letter to Astrid, Ingrid states:

*If you possess the slightest hint of common sense, RUN from this woman, as you would a flesh-eating virus.*

*Yes, the patriarchy has created this reprehensible world of prisons and Wall Streets and welfare mothers, but it’s not something in which one should collude! My God, the woman is a prostitute,*

that Astrid and Ray are having an affair. Astrid refuses to tell the authorities that Starr was the one who shot her because Astrid blames herself for getting involved with Ray, even though she is just a fourteen year old child and Ray is an adult.
what would you expect her to say? “Stand up for your rights”? You’d think, as a black woman, she would be ashamed to lick the master’s boots, say it’s Whitey’s world, make the best of it.... (Fitch 155)

On the surface, Ingrid’s reaction to Olivia appears to be similar to Marvel’s; however, the two reactions are quite different. Marvel views Olivia with disgust and hatred, not just because Olivia is a prostitute but also because she is black. On the other hand, Ingrid’s disgust towards Olivia lies in the fact that Olivia accepts that it is a man’s world and refuses to fight the system. Moreover, whereas part of Marvel’s hatred towards Olivia is based on racism, Ingrid is disgusted that Olivia conforms to societal views, believing that Olivia should fight her oppressors - men, particularly white men.

Olivia is everything that Marvel fails to be. Astrid repeatedly uses the word “elegant” to describe Olivia or Olivia’s possessions: “It seemed impossible that a woman so elegant could live right next door to us with our fifty-inch TV....” Later, when Astrid is invited into Olivia’s house, Astrid claims: “Was there anything as elegant as Olivia’s house?” (Fitch 138-140). Part of Astrid’s obsession with Olivia is that Olivia represents beauty and sophistication, two things that are missing from Astrid’s life. But more importantly, Olivia is someone with whom Astrid is able to talk:

I was going to tell her that I did, an older man, make is sound glamorous, but I ended up telling her my sorry life history, Starr and Ray, my mother, Marvel Turlock. She was easy to talk to, sympathetic. She asked questions, listened, and kept the music coming, tea and lemon cookies. I felt I had woken up on my raft to find a yacht dropping a ladder. You never knew when rescue might come. (Fitch 142)
Astrid is obsessed with Olivia because Olivia emanates elegance and also treats Astrid as a peer - something that no other woman has done before.

Olivia’s reaction to patriarchy differs from both Ingrid’s, who fights it, and Starr’s, who succumbs to it; on the other hand, Olivia learns to work the system, fully aware of what she is doing. For example, consider the following conversation between Olivia and Astrid:

"It’s a man’s world, Astrid," she said. “You ever hear that?”

I nodded. A man’s world. But what did it mean? That men whistled and stared and yelled things at you, and you had to take it, or you get raped or beat up. A man’s world meant places where men could go but not women. It meant they had more money, and didn’t have kids, not the way women did, to look after every second. And it meant that women loved them more than they loved the women, that they could want something with all their hearts, and then not....

But Olivia didn’t mean men like Ed Turlock or even Ray. She meant men with money. That man’s world.

The cuff links and offices. (Fitch 143)

The dialogue between Astrid and Olivia is the heart of understanding the theme of patriarchy within White Oleander. In their conversation, Olivia expresses to Astrid that the power of the world is in the hands of men, especially men with money. In other words, women live in a patriarchal society.

Furthermore, Olivia’s reaction to patriarchy differs from Ingrid’s as well as from Starr’s and even Marvel’s. Similar to Ingrid, Olivia is aware that men hold the power in society; however, unlike Ingrid, Olivia refuses to fight the system. Instead, Olivia embraces the system using sex as her coping
method. For Olivia, sex is a means to get what she wants—money. Although Olivia believes that she has adjusted to a patriarchal society, she fails to comprehend that her finances, and thus her happiness, is purely dependent on the men around her. Therefore, she is not liberated from patriarchy.

Patriarchy also affects Claire Richards, another of Astrid’s mother-figures. Unlike Ingrid and Olivia, but similarly to Starr and Marvel, Claire devotes her life to her husband Ron. Claire becomes obsessed with Ron and their marriage. For example, sadness weighed on Claire because of Ron’s coming in and out of her life:

Ron was gone most of the summer. He came home and she did his laundry and cooked too much food. He made phone calls, worked on his laptop computer, had meetings, checked his messages, and then he was gone again.

It threw Claire when he came and then went so soon, but at least she didn’t pace at night anymore. (Fitch 223)

Astrid’s observation of Ron and Claire shows the patriarchal dynamics of Ron and Claire’s marriage. When Ron is present, Claire takes care of him (on the other hand, Ron only focuses on his career). Too, when Ron leaves for a job, Claire becomes unsettled, thus demonstrating her dependence on Ron. Furthermore, Ron belittles Claire when she suggests that he should quit his job so he could be home more often. Ron responds:

“What, you think I come off a fourteen-hour day, jetlagged, at some spoonbending convention in Yakutsk, ready to party? Hey, wow, bring on the bimbos! Maybe you should try to getting some work, and remember what it’s like to be wiped out at the end of the day..."
"Astrid doesn’t need you waiting with the milk and the cookies. Jesus, Claire! She’s a young woman...." (Fitch 243)

Here, Ron claims that Claire should find some work and leave Astrid alone. By saying this, Ron asserts that acting as a mother and homemaker is not a worthy job. More importantly, he fails to recognize that Claire is unable to get a job as an actress because it is highly competitive and judgmental of women.

Claire’s career represents the way society views women, “you’re too ethnic. Too classic. Too something” (210). In this conversation Claire tells Astrid that as an actress this is how the public and her colleagues view her. Claire begins to view herself the same way that the “patriarchal” society views her. In her article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey states:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (442)

As an actress, Claire is constantly under the male gaze. When directors and Ron reject Claire, it is because she fails to meet the fantasy image that men force onto women: Claire’s profession often requires her to be subjected to and oppressed by men. Not only is Claire humiliated when she is turned down professionally, but her husband also rejects her as a wife and
lover. Thus, she experiences a double oppression in both her career and her marriage.

Claire’s desire to be loved by her husband is unfulfilled. As a married woman, Claire believes she has failed in her role as wife because her husband was cheating on her and did not want to stay with her. Furthermore, Claire allows herself to become dependent on her husband for her happiness and her existence in life.
CHAPTER 2

Double Oppression

Double oppression occurs in White Oleander insofar as the male characters oppress the female characters, and in return the female characters displace their oppression onto Astrid. Double oppression is further evidence that the mother-daughter relationship is significantly shaped by the men in the novel (as the first chapter explains). In this section I focus on the relationships between Astrid and Ingrid, Astrid and Marvel, and Astrid and Amelia.

Astrid and Ingrid’s relationship is complex, largely because it is based on oppression. The patriarchal society in which Ingrid lives oppresses her. Ingrid, aware of the persistently oppressive society, constantly tries to resist the powers of patriarchy, not only for herself but for Astrid, too. Moreover, Ingrid does not want Astrid to fall victim to patriarchy; thus, she tries to protect Astrid from patriarchy by controlling Astrid’s life, especially Astrid’s relationships. Ingrid fails to realize that by controlling Astrid’s life, she is not behaving much differently from the men she fights so hard to resist.

One way Ingrid resists patriarchy is through the use of words; a poet, Ingrid’s words express her desires, beliefs, and fears. Ingrid uses words as a vehicle for freedom that allows her to break the bonds of patriarchy and oppression. On the other hand, Ingrid’s words also become Astrid’s prison. Astrid is imprisoned by Ingrid’s words because of the overpowering impact Ingrid’s words possess and the silencing effect they have on Astrid: “My words, that’s what she wanted. ‘What’s this?’
she kept asking. ‘What’s this?’ But how could I tell her? She’d taken all the words” (Fitch 352). To complicate matters further, Ingrid fails to try to understand why Astrid is so silent. Says Astrid:

Remember how they didn’t know if I spoke English when we came back to the States? They tested me to find out if I was retarded or deaf. But you never asked why. You never thought, maybe I should have left Astrid some words. (Fitch 352)

This quotation reveals (1) the absence of Astrid’s words, and (2) the lack of concern Ingrid shows toward Astrid because she never encourages Astrid to speak. In short, Ingrid’s words oppress Astrid because of the silencing effect they carry.

Fran Scoble writes about the dangers of mothers’ silencing daughters. She asserts:

It is also the silence of a woman who accepts a role presented to her by the mother who represents a society which has already decided when she shall speak and what she shall safely say. For the perpetuation of the lie which has bound women to the silence of their souls and minds is not, in fact, possible without the collusion of mothers with the external social requirements of gender identity. (Scoble 127)

Scoble suggests women’s silence bolsters a male ideology that dictates the appropriate time for when women can vocalize their opinions, needs, and wants. Ingrid speaks for Astrid and causes Astrid to remain silent; thus, she is guilty of oppressing Astrid by refusing to allow Astrid to speak her own mind.

The complexity of Astrid’s oppression lies in the guilt she feels towards Ingrid. As a single mother, Ingrid must provide

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7 Nancy Friday claims that “guilt is the result of introjection, the taking in of the critical parent we can’t afford to leave ‘out there,’ to hate, be angry with, and possibly lose. Instead, we introject the
for Astrid and herself. Astrid, aware of this, is consumed by guilt: "I knew the only reason we were here was because of me. If it weren’t for me, she wouldn’t have to take jobs like this... I felt my guilt like a brand" (Fitch 9). Ingrid’s behavior causes Astrid to feel guilty. Astrid is aware that Ingrid is an oppressive force; yet, Astrid is unaware that she also oppresses herself. Astrid is constantly overwhelmed with guilt, which prevents her from expressing her needs and wants:

And I tried not to make it worse by asking for things, pulling her down with my thoughts. I had seen girls clamor for new clothes and complain about what their mothers made for dinner. I was always mortified. Didn’t they know they were tying their mothers to the ground? Weren’t chains ashamed of their prisoners? (Fitch 11)

The importance of this quote is threefold: (1) it demonstrates Astrid’s silence, (2) it reveals Astrid’s guilt, and (3) it shows that Astrid oppresses herself. Astrid’s silence is a consequence of Ingrid’s oppressive nature; however, it also demonstrates, at least in the above case, that Astrid’s guilt keeps her from making her voice heard. Furthermore, Astrid is hypersensitive to avoid becoming a daughter who, in turn, imprisons or oppresses her mother.9

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9 Astrid reinforces this notion when she states: "I couldn’t tell my mother I’d outgrown my shoes again. I didn’t want to remind her that I was the reason she was trapped in electric bills and kid’s shoes grown too small, the reason she was clawing at the windows like Michael’s dying tomatoes. She was a beautiful woman dragging a crippled foot and I was that foot. I was bricks sewn into the hem of her clothes, I was a steel dress" (Fitch 10). Again, Astrid does not voice her needs because she feels guilty that Ingrid has to take care of her, believing that she is imprisoning Ingrid.
Marvel Turlock, Astrid’s second foster mother, is another negative force to whom Astrid falls victim. Astrid’s role at the Turlocks’ is that of servant: “babysitter, pot scrubber, laundry maid, beautician” (Fitch 124). While these roles vary, all involve being either a house servant or a body servant. In other words, Marvel transfers her role of “servitude” to Astrid; before Astrid lives with the Turlocks, Marvel was the babysitter, pot scrubber, laundry maid, and beautician. Thus, a double oppression occurs between Marvel and Astrid: Marvel, who is imprisoned by her husband and family, relinquishes her role to Astrid, who is then restrained by Marvel.

In believing, and asserting, that Astrid will not amount to anything, Marvel minimizes Astrid: “‘You could go to beauty school. That’s a good living for a woman’” (Fitch 126). Here, Marvel limits Astrid’s potential to the home and beauty school, failing to realize that a woman’s role can go beyond the household, cosmetology, or military service. Marvel’s perception of Astrid’s potential demonstrates that she has been forced into believing that a woman’s role is not equal to that of a man’s.

Furthermore, Marvel’s view of Astrid is skewed. After Marvel and her fellow Mary Kay saleswomen make over Astrid, they believe that Astrid resembles a model. Astrid disagrees:

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Janneke van Mens-Verhulst explores the complex relationship that mothers and daughters share in her article, “Reinventing the Mother-daughter Relationship.” She claims: “Daughters, in their turn, experience the restraints and conflicts mainly in an indirect way. To begin with, they must behave as perfect (obedient) daughters in order to confirm their mothers’ godliness” (van Mens-Verhulst 529). Astrid is an example of an obedient daughter by never asking for anything; thus she confirms Ingrid’s all powerful stature.

Astrid, however, disagrees: “But I would rather live out on the desert alone, like an old prospector. All I needed was a small water source. What was the point in such loneliness among people. At least if you were by yourself, you had a good reason to be lonely” (Fitch 131). Although Marvel is looking out for Astrid’s best interest, she
Looking back at me was a thirty-year-old hostess at Denny’s. Anything else I can get you hon? I could feel this vision burning itself into my soul, burning away Deneuve and Dietrich like acid thrown in my face. The woman in the mirror would not have to orchestrate three different lovers. She would not dance on rooftops in Mexico, fly first class to London over the pole. She was in for varicose veins and a single apartment with cat litter and Lana Turner movies. She would drink by herself with tomatoes dying on the windowsills. She would buy magic every day of the week. Love me, that face said. I’m so lonely, so desperate. I’ll give you whatever you want. (Fitch 152)

This passage reinforces the piteous nature of Marvel’s life through Astrid’s eyes. Marvel makes-over Astrid, believing that the outcome is an improvement to what Astrid was beforehand. Instead, Astrid sees herself potentially as a waitress who never accomplishes any of her dreams and whose future is woefully limited. The difference between Astrid’s and Marvel’s view of Astrid’s future is further evidence that Marvel is a victim of imprisonment who transfers her oppression onto Astrid; however, Marvel accepts her role whereas Astrid does not. Similar to Ingrid, Marvel does not recognize that she is inhibiting Astrid: unlike Ingrid, Marvel does not even recognize that she is a victim. In both cases, Astrid is aware that Marvel and Ingrid are suppressive forces.

Astrid’s third foster mother is Amelia Ramos. Amelia, too, oppresses Astrid. Amelia differs from the other women within White Oleander because she is an immigrant from Argentina who loses the stature she once held in her homeland. Thus, not only still fails to understand Astrid, and more importantly, never tries to
is Amelia a victim of a patriarchal society as are the other women, but she also struggles as an immigrant trying to survive in the United States. Although Amelia is herself a victim, she still deliberately de-humanizes Astrid and her other foster daughters. Astrid is aware of Amelia’s pernicious nature within the first day of moving into Amelia’s home. Astrid notices a picture that Amelia took of her maids pulling weeds when living in Argentina: “It gave me the creeps. It was one thing to have somebody pull weeds, but why would anyone take a picture of it? I decided I was better off not knowing” (Fitch 192). The picture of the maids is depressing. Furthermore, the picture warns Amelia’s foster daughters of what type of mother-figure they are living with.

Amelia oppresses the girls by starving them:
On the weekends, when Amelia was home, we got fed, but during the week, we only had dinner. She kept a lock on the refrigerator, and had the phone and the TV in her room. You had to ask permission to use the phone. (Fitch 194).

Amelia, the matriarch of the household, uses her power by withholding food and other privileges from her foster daughters. To survive, Astrid resorts to eating food from trashcans and begging for money. Amelia is fully aware of her oppressive actions and even recommends to a friend that she should take in girls for the money: by denying the girls food and other needs, Amelia is able to use the money she receives from being a foster mother to remodel her house instead of providing the basic necessities for her foster daughters (Fitch 200).

Furthermore, Amelia aligns the girls against one another: “She played us off one another. I stole a can of yams one night, and she made Kiki tell her who did it” (Fitch 200). When Amelia understand her.
aligns the girls against each other, they cannot unite to fight against their foster mother; this is a form of oppression because Amelia controls the dynamics in the house by maintaining superiority over her charges. Ingrid and Amelia are comparable in that both women are controlling forces who are fully aware of the power that they hold over their daughter(s).
CHAPTER 3

Fantasy Mother

Recent works in feminist theory that focus on the mother-child relationship argue the notion of the fantasy mother. The image of the fantasy mother “is that of the mythical figure who sees, understands, and fulfills her children’s every need” (Kripps and Halldis 87). Chodorow and Contratto are critical of this self-sacrificing mother because she is one who is willing to give up her life as an individual to ensure the happiness of her child. Nancy Friday is a leading proponent of the self-sacrificing mother. Chodorow and Contratto actually accuse Friday of being “the most traditional traditionalist,” because Friday calls for mothers to relinquish their own happiness for the sake of their daughters (Chodorow and Contratto 57).

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12 Janneke van Mens-Verhulst agrees with Chodorow and Contratto on their views of feminist theory on the perfect mother. Van Mens-Verhulst states: “All theories, classical and feminist, assumed the possibility of a perfect mother who can satisfy human desires for love, nurture, empathy, and needs for protection and reassurance, and who relieves anxieties, discontents, loneliness and self-responsibility” (van Mens-Verhulst 527-528).
The woman who abandons all forms of patriarchy is another type of fantasy mother that Chodorow and Contratto discuss. They examine Judith Arcana’s work. Arcana asserts:

The oppression of women has created a breach among us, especially between mothers and daughters. Women cannot respect their mothers in a society which degrades them; women cannot respect themselves.

(Aracana 1)

Arcana further suggests that women need to resist and free themselves from oppression caused by patriarchy in order to earn respect from society, and, more importantly, become the perfect mother to their daughters.13

The type of fantasy mother seen in *White Oleander* combines both the self-sacrificing mother and the mother who abandons patriarchy. Claire represents the self-sacrificing mother who focuses on Astrid’s happiness while remaining depressed and unhappy because of the oppressive nature of her marriage and job. Ingrid is an example of the mother who resists patriarchy; although Ingrid is not Astrid’s fantasy mother, she is the fantasy mother to young feminists:

We’re at Pitzer College, out in Pomona. We studied her [Ingrid] in Women’s Studies. We visit her every week. She knows so much about everything, she’s really incredible. Every time we go she just blows us away.

(Fitch 368)

In the above dialogue, two young students confess to Astrid their admiration of and loyalty toward Ingrid. In other words, Ingrid is a role-model and mother-figure at a distance for other young women even if she fails to be one for Astrid.

13 Chodorow and Contratto criticize Arcana. They state: “But this implies that if only we could remove these patriarchal constraints, mothering could be perfect” (57).
Astrid believes her fantasy mother is Claire; Claire seems to be everything that Ingrid fails to be. Astrid describes what she wants in a mother: “But how I envy the way their [other daughters] mothers sat on their beds and asked what they were thinking. My mother was not in the least bit curious about me” (Fitch 11). Here, Astrid comments on the fact that Ingrid never tries to learn about her as other mothers do with their daughters. On the other hand, Claire is curious about Astrid: “Claire wanted to know things like, did I like coconut soap or green apple? I didn’t know. ‘No you have to decide,’ she said” (Fitch 211). Unlike Ingrid, Claire is interested in Astrid’s likes and dislikes; more importantly, through Claire’s questions, Astrid is able to discover things about herself.

Furthermore, Astrid comments on a picture of herself in Claire’s room: “Claire had a picture of me on her bureau, next to one of her and Ron, in a sterling silver frame. Nobody had ever framed a picture of me and set it on the dresser” (Fitch 224). Astrid’s comment emphasizes that she is on the periphery of Ingrid’s life, whereas she is more central to Claire’s.

The idea of fantasy mother is just that, a fantasy. Claire’s image as Astrid’s fantasy mother is broken apart just before Claire commits suicide, says Astrid: “How I despised her weakness” (Fitch 282). Astrid recognizes and admits that Claire has faults. Although Astrid is aware of and comments on Claire’s weakness, she always felt the need to protect her. Thus, Astrid no longer idealizes Claire, and furthermore, she begins to sees Claire as the rest of society views her. Astrid’s image of Claire as the perfect mother is shattered when Astrid admits that Claire is weak.

Astrid’s relationship with Claire actually parallels her relationship with Ingrid, furthering the idea that Claire is never Astrid’s fantasy mother. For example, when Claire asks
Astrid how school is, Astrid intentionally leaves out images that she knows will upset Claire (e.g., violence, sex, and drugs). Astrid does not want to upset Claire; thus, she only reveals things that would make Claire happy: “I wanted the world to be beautiful for her [Claire]. I wanted things to work out. I always had a great day, no matter what” (Fitch 217). Through the act of silence, Astrid tries to protect Claire by not revealing anything that would upset her; Astrid’s act of silence with Claire is similar to the way she refused to tell Ingrid her wants and needs. With both relationships, Astrid is still unable to be honest and truthful; furthering the notion that neither mother is perfect.

Astrid fears that both Ingrid and Claire will leave her. That Astrid fears Ingrid and Claire will abandon her shows that Astrid does not fully trust either woman. Astrid’s fear of being left occurs early in the novel: “My deepest fear was that someday she [Ingrid] would find her way back there and never return” (Fitch 11). Moreover, Astrid’s fears come to fruition when she asserts:

I was afraid she [Ingrid] would fly away, and I would end up alone, living in some place where there were too many children, too many smells, where beauty and silence and the intoxication of her words rising in air would be as far away as Saturn. (Fitch 12)

Astrid’s fear of abandonment is realized when Ingrid is arrested for the murder of Barry. Ingrid’s arrest is the catalyst of change that occurs in Astrid’s life: after the arrest, Astrid is

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14 Nancy Friday comments on daughters fearing their mothers leaving them. She suggests: “Daughters fear they will anger their mother so much that mother will desert them” (168). This fear of leaving is one reason why Astrid is silent around Ingrid: Astrid believes that if she asks for something Ingrid will leave her behind for a simpler life.
sent to foster homes and her whole life is turned upside down. Not only does Ingrid leave Astrid, so does Claire. Claire abandons Astrid when she kills herself: “She [Claire] never even said good-bye. The day my mother left, she didn’t look back either” (Fitch 290). Here, Astrid comments on the similarity between Ingrid and Claire, that both mothers abandon Astrid. Ingrid and Claire’s actions are counterexamples to the idea of what a perfect mother should be but also prove that the notion of a fantasy mother is, in fact, an illusion.

In addition to representing fantasy mothers in White Oleander, Ingrid and Claire are also each other’s other. Claire appears to be the exact opposite of Ingrid, especially in her relationship with Astrid (Claire is Astrid’s fantasy mother because she is everything that Ingrid fails to be). On the surface Claire and Ingrid appear to be each others’ other; however, the two are actually as similar as they are dissimilar.

Ingrid and Claire are dissimilar in the way they treat one another. For example, when Astrid and Claire visit Ingrid in jail, Claire is straightforward and honest. Ingrid uses Claire’s attributes to her advantage, manipulating Claire:

“To tell you the truth, my [Claire] career’s a disaster. I botched my last job so badly, I’ll probably never work again.”

Why did she always have to tell the truth? I [Astrid] should have told her, certain people should always be lied to.

My mother instinctively felt for the crack in Claire’s personal history, like a rock climber in fog

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15 It is important to note that towards the end of the novel, Astrid remembers that Ingrid has left her once before when Astrid was only a toddler. Thus, Astrid’s fear of abandonment is magnified because Ingrid had already left Astrid once before.
sensing fingerholds in a cliff. “Nerves?” she said kindly. (Fitch 248)

In this scene, Ingrid preys on Claire’s weakness as Claire reveals the truth about herself to Ingrid. Furthermore, Ingrid uses Claire’s weakness against her by convincing Claire that her husband is cheating on her, even though Ingrid had never met him. Thus, we can see how the two characters differ: whereas Claire is probably too honest and too trusting, Ingrid is manipulative and predatory.

Although Ingrid and Claire appear to have differing personalities, they are very similar when it comes to choosing their men. Both Ingrid and Claire become victims of the men they love and choose the men over Astrid: “She [Claire] would give me up for him, she would do anything to have him. Just like before, my mother and Barry” (Fitch 281). Astrid is aware that although Claire and her mother appear unalike, in the end the two are quite similar, especially when it comes to the men in their lives: Ingrid murders Barry because he leaves her; Claire commits suicide because Richard is having an affair. In both of these cases, Ingrid and Claire choose the men in their lives over Astrid and themselves. Thus, Claire and Ingrid are actually as similar as they are dissimilar.

Along with the idea of the fantasy mother, Chodorow and Contratto examine four main themes of feminist theories on motherhood: (1) blaming and idealizing the mother, (2) motherhood and sexuality, (3) motherhood and aggression or death, and (4) isolation of mother and child (Chodorow and Contratto 63). According to Chodorow and Contratto, these four themes are interrelated: “Their continuity with dominant cultural understandings of mothering and their rootedness in unprocessed, infantile fantasies about mothers” (Chodorow and
Contratto 63). For present purposes, I will focus on the themes of (1) blaming and idealizing the mother, and (4) the isolation of mother and child. These two themes coincide with one another in White Oleander because Ingrid is isolated from society while raising Astrid. Thus, Astrid is left to idealize Ingrid and then blame her mother for all of her problems (which in turn, causes Astrid to view Claire as her fantasy mother).

Blaming and idealizing the mother makes mother almighty and ultimately responsible for the world around her (because the patriarchal society in which we live isolates the mother and her child). This type of power both idealizes the mother and creates the opposite effect where the mother is blamed for everything; Astrid and Ingrid’s relationship exhibits this. In the beginning of the novel, Astrid idolizes Ingrid and mirrors her actions. Astrid pretends she is Ingrid when she is in the car waiting for Ingrid to return from Barry’s house: “I imagined my own ice-blue eyes looking at some man telling him to go away, that I was busy. ‘You’re not my type,’ I said coolly into the rearview mirror” (Fitch 28). This scene is important because it shows Astrid mimicking Ingrid’s behavior. By pretending to be Ingrid, Astrid demonstrates her idealization of her mother.

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16 Although Claire is suffering from severe depression, Richard’s affair is the primary cause of her psychological distress.  
17 Janneke van Mens-Verhulst discusses the role of the mother, and why blame is placed on the mother. She states: “The responsibility of human happiness was contracted out to the mother. Almost inevitably, she was also first in line of fire to blame for life’s possible and actual disillusionments” (van Mens-Verhulst 528).  
Nancy Friday compares and contrasts the idea of the “good” mother with the “bad” mother. She asserts: “Early on, children begin to avoid knowledge that mother is anything less than the good mother’ she pretends to be. Very often this is done by splitting the idea of mother into good and bad” (Friday 8).  
Ruth de Kanter suggests that in order for the daughter not to place blame on the mother, then she must learn to separate the different levels of mother: “Only then are we able not to blame the mother for the power-relations in which motherhood is organized” (31).
Another way Astrid idealizes Ingrid is seen when Astrid visits Ingrid in jail for the first time. Astrid, anxious to see Ingrid, idealizes the memory of her mother:

I was thirsty for the way she felt, the way she looked, the sound of her voice, the way her front teeth were square but her second teeth turned slightly, her one dimple, left side, her half-smile, her wonderfully, blue eyes flecked with white, like new galaxies, the firm intact planes on her face.

(Fitch 64)

Here, Astrid yearns to be with her mother and she wants to feel what Ingrid feels. Moreover, Astrid’s memory of Ingrid is in many respects positive. Astrid’s impression of her mother begins to change as she moves from foster home to foster home; by the time Astrid is living with Claire, Astrid no longer idealizes Ingrid. Instead, Astrid finds her mother blameworthy.

Astrid places blame on Ingrid in two distinct ways. The first way is more obvious; Astrid blames Ingrid for leaving her in different foster homes. The second type of blame that Astrid places on her mother is less obvious because it an emotional blame; this type of blame occurs when Astrid blames Ingrid for taking all of her words (as I discuss in the second chapter) and when Astrid blames Ingrid for killing Claire. For example, after Astrid’s social worker gives Astrid letters from Ingrid, Astrid says: “Such potential for damage, I didn’t even want to pick them up” (Fitch 338). Astrid refers to Ingrid’s letters, or more accurately her words, as the cause for Claire’s suicide; thus, she blames Ingrid for Claire’s death.
Astrid’s journey to and from each foster home is a quest to find herself and a relationship with a mother-figure. Patriarchal, and in some cases, matriarchal society, shapes all of Astrid’s relationships with her foster mothers, beginning with Starr and ending with Claire. Thus, Astrid never develops a healthy relationship with any of her foster mothers nor does she discover who she really is. Furthermore, the relationships Astrid forms with Olivia and Claire are in direct contrast to her relationship with Ingrid. The only way Astrid successfully completes her quest for self-discovery is by reconciling herself to Ingrid. Astrid is finally able to understand and accept Ingrid through the relationships she forms while living with Rena Grushenka, her last foster mother.

After Claire’s death, the Maclaren Children’s Center fosters Astrid. At the Center, Astrid realizes that her current situation does not differ from Ingrid’s. Astrid comments:

Now I found it easy to imagine my mother in her bunk at Frontera. We weren’t so different after all. The same block walls, linoleum floors, the shadow of pines against the outside lights, and the sleeping shapes of my roommates under their thin blankets. (Fitch 297)

As with Ingrid, Astrid is trapped behind walls. Astrid compares her situation to her mother’s, drawing a parallel between them; however, Astrid does not want to be similar to Ingrid. Janet Burstein calls attention to the internal struggle daughters confront when they see themselves behaving as their mothers do but want to be different from them. Burstein calls such a
struggle “mirroring.” She claims that daughters are faced with two choices:

Between the choices their mothers had made and the alternatives offered by their own time. They stood, as it were, between mirrors that offered incompatible images of the world and themselves.18 (Burstein 115)

White Oleander exhibits Burstein’s theory on mirroring insofar as Astrid recognizes Ingrid in herself but yearns to lead a life separate from her.

Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope examine the literary woman hero in their book The Female Hero in American and British Literature. Pearson and Pope argue that when the female hero discover “the powerful father within herself, she reconsiders her original repudiation of the mother. Her quest becomes a search for her true, powerful female parent” (Pearson and Pope 177). In other words, the female hero not only encompasses traditional male characteristics; she also harbors traditional female traits. Hence, the female hero must reconcile with her mother in order to maintain a balance between what society views as female and male:

A fully integrated human being, she is in a position to understand that the distinction between male and female qualities is created by the inequitable power relationship between men and women. (Pearson and Pope 178)

Thus far, Astrid’s journey from one foster home to the next has taught her about the imbalance of power between men and women. In order to create an internal balance between the two powers, Astrid must discover how not to allow patriarchy to overshadow her femininity. Therefore, Astrid must discover her own self-

18 Although Burstein focuses on Jewish American writers, her notion of mirroring can be applied to all mother-daughter relationships.
identity and must reconcile herself with Ingrid to maintain a balance between her own masculine and feminine powers.

Astrid’s journey continues when she lives with Rena Grushenka. Rena differs from Astrid’s past foster mothers in two distinct ways. First, Rena interviews Astrid before taking her in as a foster daughter. Thus, Astrid is able to meet her potential foster mother and influence whether she will live with Rena by controlling her answers and actions during the interview. In the past, a caseworker always placed Astrid in a foster home without Astrid’s ever meeting the foster family beforehand. Second, Rena is the first mother-figure of Astrid’s who is largely unaffected by patriarchy. Rena is a Russian immigrant who earns a living by selling other people’s junk. She cares for herself without relying on a man and she teaches Astrid to do the same. For example, Rena’s friend Misha tries to get in bed with Astrid. Rena tells Astrid: “’Misha won’t do nothing. Hit him on head with something’” (Fitch 330). In this scene between Astrid and Rena, Rena is basically teaching Astrid to take care of herself. Rena is not trying to protect Astrid as Ingrid would have done; instead, Astrid needs to learn how to protect herself.

Too, Rena’s relationship with Astrid differs from Astrid’s former foster mothers largely because it is not a traditional mother-daughter relationship. Rena treats Astrid and her other foster-daughters more like business partners. For example, Rena forces Astrid to sell all of her “rich” clothes that she wore when she lived with Claire; at first Astrid hesitates. Ultimately, Astrid earns over $400 for the items she sold but has to give Rena $100 of her proceeds. Although Astrid is angry that she has to sell her clothes and give Rena a share of her profits, she does admit that it felt good to earn her own money. Rena shows Astrid that she should not cling to the past by
holding onto material objects. Astrid sheds her past by selling the clothes she got from Claire. By letting go of her past, Astrid moves forward in the present.

Astrid’s journey of self-discovery begins when she separates herself from Ingrid. Astrid achieves independence by employing Ingrid’s own words to revolt against Ingrid: Astrid literally uses words from Ingrid’s letters to create a poem. The importance of the poem is twofold. First, Astrid voices her opinions and feelings towards her mother through the use of her mother’s own words; these are the same words that had once imprisoned Astrid. Second, Astrid experiences a rebirth after she creates the poem.19 She states:

How clear it was without my mother behind my eyes. I was reborn, a Siamese twin who had finally been separated from its hated, cumbersome double. I woke early, expectant as a small child, to a world washed clean of my mother’s poisonous fog, her milky miasmas.

(Fitch 356)

Astrid’s rebirth signifies the beginning of her self-discovery. She is able to see the world for the first time through her eyes without Ingrid filtering it for her.

While Astrid lives with Rena she befriends her two foster sisters, Yvonne and Nikki. Both relationships help Astrid learn about herself and Ingrid. Astrid becomes Yvonne’s surrogate mother when she agrees to become her partner at the baby class. For example, Astrid consoles Yvonne from a nightmare:

19 Alice Walker’s essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” examines the creative works that African-American grandmothers and mothers produce. Walker states: “Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength – in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own” (Walker 243). Astrid discovers Ingrid’s garden when she uses her mother’s words to create a poem. Astrid is able to unveil her inner strength by recognizing Ingrid’s creations and using them for herself.
“I had the worst dream,” she mumbled.

“People kept stealing my stuff. They took my horse.”

“It’s still there,” I said, putting my hand on her cheek. I knew it would feel cool on her hot skin. My mother used to do this when I was sick, I suddenly remembered, and for a moment I could feel it distinctly, the touch of her cool hands. (Fitch 344)

In this passage, Astrid’s actions of mothering Yvonne calls to the past when Ingrid mothered Astrid. Astrid actually is mirroring her mother’s actions. Astrid’s memory of Ingrid is important because she remembers Ingrid and not one of her foster mothers. Furthermore, Astrid reminisces when she was sick and Ingrid took care of her. Astrid recalls Ingrid’s words: “I am your home, she’d once said, and it was still true” (Fitch 345). Although Astrid’s feelings toward her mother are in conflict, she still finds comfort in her memories of Ingrid.

Moreover, when Astrid helps Yvonne give birth, her longing for Ingrid grows stronger. Astrid states:

Now I wished my mother were here. She would know how to get rid of Melinda Meek [the nurse]. Even in transition she would spit in Melinda’s stingy face, threaten to strangle her in the cord of the fetal monitor. (Fitch 401)

Here, Astrid wishes that Ingrid were with her because of the strength and power that Ingrid possesses. Not only does Astrid desire her mother to be with her, so do all of the women in the baby ward: “All down the ward, they called for their mothers. Mommy, ma, mom, mama. Even with their husbands at their sides, they called out for mama” (Fitch 403). But, the women are not

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20 Adrienne Rich posits that daughters often think of their mothers while giving birth. Says Rich: “The experience of giving birth stirs deep reverberations of her mother in a daughter; women often dream of their mothers during pregnancy and labor” (Rich 220).
calling for their own mothers; they are yearning for the universal mother. Astrid notes, in imagery reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s portrait of Sethe in *Beloved* (1987):

> They wanted the real mother, the blood mother, the great womb, mother of a fierce compassion, a woman large enough to hold all the pain, to carry it away. What we needed was someone who bled, someone deep and rich as a field, a wide-hipped mother, awesome, immense, women like huge soft couches, mothers coursing with blood, mothers big enough, wide enough, for us to hide in, to sink down to the bottom of, mothers who would breathe for us when we could not breathe anymore, who would fight for us, who would kill for us, die for us. (Fitch 404)

The mother-figure that Astrid describes is a universal mother who offers comfort, power, knowledge, and who is self-sacrificing.\(^{21}\)

When Yvonne actually gives birth, Astrid comments on the bond that the mother and child share. Astrid claims:

> And I thought of the way the baby was linked to her, as she was linked to her mother, and her mother, all the way back, inside and inside, knit into a chain of disaster that brought her to this bed, this day. And not only her. I wondered what my own inheritance was going to be. (Fitch 404)

In this passage, Astrid recalls the link between mothers and daughters that is passed down from one generation to the next. Furthermore, Astrid becomes curious about her own heritage while watching the birth of Yvonne’s baby. Thus, Astrid experiences

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\(^{21}\) Astrid’s description of the all-mighty mother ties into the last section on the fantasy mother. See pages 21 – 28.
her own birth of self-discovery by questioning her past. If Astrid wants to discover her heritage, then she must reconcile with Ingrid.

Astrid’s reconciliation with Ingrid takes place when Astrid visits her mother in prison. For the first time, Astrid is able to control the conversation between herself and Ingrid: Ingrid needs Astrid to testify at her appeal but the only way Astrid will cooperate is if Ingrid agrees to answer Astrid’s questions. Says Astrid: ‘‘Here’s the deal,’ I said. ‘‘There are certain things I want to know. You tell me, and I’ll do what you want me to do’’” (Fitch 419). Ingrid finally begins to answer questions about Astrid’s heritage. For example, Ingrid explains to Astrid why she left Klaus, Astrid’s father:

I was tired of his mediocrity, his excuses. I was making what little money we had, he was living off me, we had no home anymore, I told him it was over. He was ready, believe me, there were no tears on that score. (Fitch 423)

Ingrid leaves Klaus because she felt trapped in a dead-end relationship. Furthermore, she bore the full responsibility of providing for Klaus, Astrid, and herself. Although Klaus does not represent the typical patriarch, he nevertheless expects and requires Ingrid to bear the burden of family and finances. Ingrid fears that Klaus might do something similar to Astrid; therefore, she shields Astrid from a disappointing relationship with Klaus.

Pearson and Pope claim that the birth of self-discovery often parallels actual childbirth: “the female hero often experiences the birth of a child and the emergence of her heroic nature as complementary events. Often, moreover, the birth of the mother within makes possible a reconciliation with the actual parent” (Pearson and Pope 196).

Pearson and Pope assert that in order for the daughter to discover herself and her heritage, she must reconcile with her mother (Pearson and Pope 184).
The most important information Astrid receives, however, is not about her past. Rather, it regards her present situation with her mother. Ingrid agrees not to involve Astrid in her appeal trial. Ingrid tells Astrid: “’If you could go back, even partway, I would give anything,’ she said into my ear” (Fitch 432). Here, Ingrid admits that she is sorry and wants to see Astrid live a life that is not tainted by her mother’s actions. Says Astrid: “It was all I ever really wanted, that revelation” (Fitch 432). Thus, Astrid and Ingrid do reconcile and Astrid is able to complete her journey of self-discovery.

Pearson and Pope claim:

The treasure the hero claims at the completion of the journey is herself. Discovering herself – her whole and authentic self – she finds that her entire world is transformed. She partakes of the eternal, enjoys a new sense of trust in her perceptions about the world, and thus rejoices over her journey to the underworld. (Pearson and Pope 223)

Astrid’s journey of self-discovery ends in Berlin. Astrid reflects:

All my mothers. Like guests at a fairy-tale christening, they had bestowed their gifts on me. They were mine now. Olivia’s generosity, her knowledge of men. Claire’s tenderness and faith. If not for Marvel, how would I have penetrated the mysteries of the American family? If not for Nikki, when might I have learned to laugh? And Yvonne, mi hermosa, you gave me the real mother, the blood mother, that wasn’t behind wire, but somewhere inside. Rena stole my pride but gave me back something more, taught me to salvage, glean from the wreckage what could be remade and sold. (Fitch 437)
Astrid is finally able to accept her past and move forward. She develops a healthy relationship with Paul Trout, a boy she met at the Children’s Center.\textsuperscript{24} Furthermore, she reconciles with her father even though she is ultimately disappointed in him:

He wanted to make up for lost time, offered to let us stay, we could sleep on the couch, I could help out with the kids. He was sixty-one years old, and so ordinary. (Fitch 443)

When Astrid meets Klaus, he invites her to stay with his family, not as a daughter, but as someone who would help with house chores and care for his children. Astrid’s experience with her father thus does not differ substantially from her mother’s. Ingrid’s intention to protect Astrid from her father is well-founded.

Astrid’s quest ends with the realization that Ingrid loves her: “No matter how much she had damaged me or how flawed she was, how violently mistaken, my mother loved me, unquestionably” (Fitch 440). With the knowledge that Ingrid loves her, Astrid finally accepts that she is her mother’s daughter. She acknowledges that the bond between mother and daughter is unbreakable: “I could hear her. My blood whispered her name” (Fitch 442). Even though Astrid feels the bond to Ingrid, she knows that she can never return home to her mother: “It had taken me this long to be free of her shadow, to breathe on my own, even if in this singed-hair space-heater Europe” (Fitch 442). Thus, Astrid recognizes her fundamental connectedness with her mother, yet she nevertheless achieves autonomy.

\textsuperscript{24}Astrid and Paul develop a relationship that extends through Astrid’s stay at Rena’s (the two correspond through letters); however, Astrid and Paul do not live together until after Astrid graduates high school and leaves Rena’s. Eventually, Astrid and Paul move to Berlin where Astrid focuses on her artwork and Paul develops his comic books.
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jaime Lynn Kelsky was born in Valley Stream, New York, in 1978. Having spent her first 10 years in Long Island, New York, she moved to Coral Springs, Florida with her family in 1988. In 1996, Jaime entered Florida State University and graduated Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa in 1999 with her degree in English Literature. She entered the workforce at Florida State University in 1999 and continues today as full-time employee for FSU. In Fall 2001, Jaime began her Masters program in the Department of English at Florida State University as a part-time student and graduated with her Master of Arts in English Literature in Fall 2004. She currently lives in Tallahassee, Florida with her husband, two dogs, and five cats.