

MOTHER TONGUES: LANGUAGE AND MATERNITY
IN THE FICTIONS OF AUDREY THOMAS

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IN THE FICTIONS OF AUDREY THOMAS

BY

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ABSTRACT

Audrey Thomas' novels and short stories employ autobiographical material and repeated storylines to explore the relationship between language and experience. This thesis focuses on stories in which Thomas writes about maternity and motherhood, specifically female experiences which her characters struggle to capture in language. Her use of this subject matter and the techniques of autobiography and repetition leads the reader to question the shifting, non-transparent relationship between language and experience.

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INTRODUCTION

"All my novels are one novel," Audrey Thomas once told an interviewer (Graham 106). The reader of Thomas' six novels and six volumes of short stories quickly understands the author's statement. The central characters in Thomas' stories--Mrs. Blood, Isobel Cleary, Isobel Carpenter, Rachel, Alice Hoyle, the often nameless protagonists of the short stories--all these women have such similar biographies, such similar personalities, that we might almost be reading one woman's life story. And when we look at the biographical details of Audrey Thomas' life, which so closely parallel those of her characters, we almost inevitably conclude that what we are reading is the story of one woman's life: Audrey Thomas' autobiography.

Audrey Thomas' writing challenges the notion of a unified and unifying subject/speaker by urging us to ask questions. How similar is Isobel Carpenter to Mrs. Blood? To Alice Hoyle? To Audrey Thomas? Is Isobel Audrey? What does it mean to "be" Isobel, or Alice, or Audrey? Is Alice (and "all the Alices, whatever your mothers called you" as the dedication to *Blown Figures* reads) created by the stories she tells? Is Audrey Thomas? Am I?

Thomas frequently relates an event in one of her novels or short stories which will appear again in a later story, with a few key details changed. This technique can be disconcerting to the reader. It reminds us that what we are

reading is neither straightforward autobiography, nor a traditional fictional narrative which maintains the pretence of representing real experience literally. It is, instead, writing which deliberately destabilizes traditional narrativity. Even as Audrey Thomas fixes an experience in language, she reminds us that this transparent relationship of language to experience is an illusion.

The use of repeated stories and autobiographical material in Audrey Thomas' writing draws the reader's attention to the process of storytelling: how experience is translated into language and how we, in turn, are shaped and defined by that language. Few critics have failed to comment on Thomas' fascination with language, evidenced in her use of puns and etymologies, as well as her persistent postmodern fascination with the act of storytelling. In fact, all her writing is writing about writing, about words and their inadequate but necessary attempts to embody experience. In this thesis I hope to explore how Thomas' fiction thematizes the problematic relationship between language and experience, and to show how her use of autobiographical and repeated stories contributes to this process.

I have chosen to concentrate on those of Thomas' novels and short stories which have birth and motherhood as their central themes. Maternity is a concern in many of Thomas' stories. The experience of birth is often paralleled with the

act of writing, especially in Thomas' early works centering on miscarriage, an event which she has called a "parody of birth" (Bowering, "Songs and Wisdom" 15). Later novels and stories feature mature women, mothers and writers, who struggle to define themselves in language. Finally, several stories about the relationship between mothers and daughters suggest the extent to which women's reality is shaped by their own, and their mothers', stories.

Of the few major studies of Audrey Thomas that have been written (three unpublished Master's theses and a monograph by Barbara Godard), none is specifically concerned with her use of autobiography and repetition, nor with her treatment of women as mothers. None includes the two volumes of short stories Thomas has published since her 1984 novel *Intertidal Life*. These two collections--*Goodbye Harold, Good Luck* (1986) and *The Wild Blue Yonder* (1990)--contain stories which are central to understanding Thomas' treatment of the relationship between mothers and daughters, which will be discussed in the third chapter of this thesis.

The first two chapters of this thesis follow a roughly chronological pattern. Some of Audrey Thomas' earliest works, specifically the short story "If One Green Bottle...." and the novel *Mrs. Blood*, center on the experience of miscarriage. After examining this short story and this novel in some detail in Chapter One, "Parodies of Birth," I will look briefly at

Blown Figures to see how it continues this theme of miscarriage. The story "The More Little Mummy in the World" and the recent "The Slow of Despond" will also be discussed in this chapter.

Although "The Slow of Despond" shows that Audrey Thomas can return years later to explore again a theme she has written about before, the main character in most of her stories changes, after *Blown Figures*, from a young mother to a middle-aged divorcée and single mother, as Thomas herself was after 1972. Stories from this period will be discussed in the second chapter, "Writing Well." Most of these are drawn from the collection *Real Mothers* and the novels *Latakia* and *Intertidal Life*.

The third chapter, "Wounds as Well as Blessings," breaks this semi-chronological pattern to look specifically at the relationship between mothers and daughters in Thomas' fictions. This relationship is obviously an important one to Thomas, and is first explored in detail in the 1973 novel *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, an apparently autobiographical coming-of-age novel. Later stories usually approach the relationship not from the daughter's perspective but the mother's. The mothers in these stories, found in *Real Mothers*, *Goodbye Harold*, *Good Luck*, and *Intertidal Life*, are Audrey Thomas' own contemporaries, divorced women raising adolescent daughters in the 1970s, and from this perspective

the mother/daughter relationship is viewed much more positively than it is in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. This chapter concludes with an analysis of two short stories, one from *Goodbye Harold, Good Luck*, and one from *The Wild Blue Yonder*, which explore how Audrey Thomas' heroine responds, as an adult, to the aging mother whose volatile personality so dominated her childhood. A central concern for all these women is, as the title of *Songs My Mother Taught Me* indicates, what "songs," what stories, what mythology, will be passed on from mother to daughter. Through these explorations of maternity, motherhood and daughterhood, I hope to show how Thomas' use of repeated, autobiographical storylines challenges us to question the link between language and experience. She encourages us to ask how we as women, as mothers and daughters, can tell our unique stories in a language traditionally dominated by male writers and male concerns, and how the process of telling these stories shapes who we are.

CHAPTER ONE

"PARODIES OF BIRTH": MISCARRIAGE, ABORTION, AND BIRTH IN AUDREY THOMAS' FICTIONS

Audrey Thomas' first published short story, "If One Green Bottle...", which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1965, was a striking enough accomplishment that a publisher, Bobbs-Merrill, offered her a two-book contract on the strength of that story alone (Amussen 66). It is possibly the most anthologized of Thomas' many short stories. More than just its chronological position makes this story an ideal starting point for a study of Thomas' work. Many of the themes and techniques that recur in her fiction are introduced in "If One Green Bottle...", including three that are of particular interest in this study: an experimental style that reveals the author's concern with language and voice, subject matter related to motherhood and maternity, and the use of autobiographical material.

When her first short story collection, *Ten Green Bottles*, appeared in 1967, the largely favourable reviews did not make any special mention of "If One Green Bottle...." One review describes the story as "a stream-of-consciousness presentation of the thoughts of a woman during labor and birth" and comments that the stream-of-consciousness technique, effective in this story, "becomes a slightly annoying mannerism" when used in some of the other stories. The same reviewer praises

this story and two others because in them "an authentic voice...persuades the reader to accept them as genuine experiences" (rev. of *Ten Green Bottles*, *Choice* 836). Since this story, like all Thomas' work, actively questions the non-transparent nature of language and its relationship to experience, this praise might be seen as somewhat ironic.

Another contemporary reviewer names "Omo," "Xanadu," and "A Winter's Tale" as the best stories in the collection, and observes that "some of the rest" (perhaps including "If One Green Bottle...") "are rather unrealized and spotty" (rev. of *Ten Green Bottles*, *Publishers' Weekly* 60). Most other reviewers comment favourably on the collection as a whole without singling out "If One Green Bottle...."

Despite the lack of critical attention the story received when published in *Ten Green Bottles*, its central place within Audrey Thomas' work is clear. In this story Thomas presents us with a narrator whose identity is unclear throughout much of the story and whose stream-of-consciousness narration often invites us to question her sanity. The fragmented narrative, liberally sprinkled with ellipses, is filled with the kind of literary allusions, puns, and etymological explorations that will quickly become familiar to anyone who reads much of Audrey Thomas' work. Both overtly, through the narrator's thoughts, and indirectly through its technique, the story raises the question of how experience can be translated into

language.

The type of experience with which the narrator wrestles is also important in the context of Thomas' work as a whole. The reviewer quoted above who summarized it as "the thoughts of a woman during labor and birth" responded to the most obvious level of meaning in the story, without mentioning that the end product of this birth is nothing--it is, in fact, a protracted and painful miscarriage. The experience of maternity is a central concern in many of Thomas' works, and, especially in the early works on which this chapter will focus, that experience is often one of "failed" maternity--a miscarriage or an abortion. How to record this private, neglected, deeply personal aspect of women's experience in language is the major problem not just of "If One Green Bottle..." but of the novels *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures* as well.

Audrey Thomas further problematizes this relationship between language and experience by daring her readers to ask how closely her stories parallel the author's personal experience. In 1965, Thomas was living in Africa with her husband and two children and had recently suffered a traumatic miscarriage. In that year she published "If One Green Bottle...", the story of a white woman having a miscarriage in an African hospital.

Most critics have commented on the common backgrounds

Thomas' main characters share with one another and with their author, though no indepth study of these parallels has been undertaken. Anthony Boxill, in a 1972 review of Thomas' first three books, observes the similar backgrounds of characters and concludes somewhat tentatively that "One always has the feeling that Audrey Thomas' fiction is substantially autobiographical" (Boxill 116). Constance Rooke, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, states more confidently that "Audrey Thomas' fiction is largely and conspicuously autobiographical" (Rooke 334). In his *Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*, John Moss says, "Thomas writes autobiographical fiction. Time and again in her novels and short stories the same main character and circumstances lie revealed before us, splayed in a variety of voices and disguises that do little to conceal their common source outside the text in the author's life" (Moss 355).

Audrey Thomas' own comments on the autobiographical nature of her work suggest that she is not particularly concerned about concealing those sources. "I really don't know anyone as well as I know myself. I find it very presumptuous to write about other people" (Bowering, "Songs and Wisdom" 14). In another interview she commented, "I think everybody writes autobiography. I think everybody writes one story, has one thing that really interests them" (Wachtel, "Interview" 58).

At least one critic finds Thomas' concentration on her "one story" to be a flaw in her writing. Anne Archer suggests that "When a story partakes almost exclusively of autobiography, it seems that the tale runs the risk of either turning in on itself, the teller, or both" (Archer 214). She describes the effect of Thomas' autobiographical repetition as "an obsession" producing "claustrophobia" (214, 215). Barbara Godard, responding to Archer's essay, replies: "That repetition has always functioned as *différence* in Thomas' work is something Archer has overlooked" (Godard, *Audrey Thomas* 19). She goes on to observe that in Thomas' fiction "The stories of life merge with the stories of art, for both employ selection and arrangement in order to make them story, and details in a new context have a different meaning" (45). In all her work, Thomas draws attention to this process of "selection and arrangement." To accuse her of lacking originality because she uses autobiographical material and because she retells the same stories over and over (a technique we will examine more closely in Chapter 2) is to ignore her emphasis on process. The act of writing itself, of using language to create and recreate experience, is central to all Audrey Thomas' novels and short stories.

Another critic, Susan Rudy Dorscht, sees the autobiographical element as central in Thomas' postmodern questioning of the self. She suggests that, "as current

psychoanalytic and deconstructive theory does, the writing of Audrey Thomas asks us to reread our notions of what constitutes not only the 'self' but concurrently the autobiographical self" (Rudy Dorscht, "Blown Figures and Blood," *Future Indicative* 222).

A further criticism sometimes aimed at admittedly autobiographical fiction is suggested in John Moss' comment on Audrey Thomas' novel *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, a memoir of childhood and youth which will be discussed in Chapter 3. "The effect is...that needs are being met outside the fictional reality--always a danger in 'confessional' fiction" (Moss 353). The "needs" Moss refers to are no doubt the ones which concerned another reviewer of the same novel, who says, "Often such disguised autobiography becomes mere therapy for the author," though, he hastens to add, "this is not true of Audrey Thomas' work" (Stevens 259). Whether Moss or Stevens is right about the overall effect of *Songs My Mother Taught Me* is less important than the question of why writing-as-therapy is seen as having little or no value. Audrey Thomas herself has described "If One Green Bottle..." as her first "real" story precisely because it fulfilled this need: "it *had* to be written, it seemed to be the only way I could organize the horror and utter futility of a six-months-long drawn-out miscarriage in a hospital in Africa" (Thomas, "My Craft and Sullen Art" 153). Again, the emphasis is on the attempt to

"organize" the chaos of experience by writing it. As Thomas draws our attention again and again to the process of telling the story, we can hardly escape being aware of the needs that motivate that process.

"If One Green Bottle..." is a story about telling a story, about how a woman's story of a childbirth that produces "nothing" has not been told and perhaps cannot be told in a language written down by men and largely dominated by male concerns. The problem of writing the experience of maternity, first taken up in this story, is one Audrey Thomas continues to explore throughout her writing.

"If One Green Bottle..." takes place entirely inside the consciousness of a woman in labour, a woman whose perceptions are quite possibly distorted by the drugs she has been given. In her pain and anxiety, the narrator seeks to identify with another woman's experience: that of the Virgin Mary. Not only is Mary a character with whom the pregnant woman can identify, but she is also a woman whose story has been told by men. "And the days were accomplished. Unfair to gloss that over...to make so little of the waiting...the months...the hours. They make no mention of the hours; but of course, men wrote it down. How were they to know?" (*Ten Green Bottles* 5).

Thomas' attempt to rewrite Mary's experience in her own, female voice, signals her unwillingness to accept the version

of women's experience that has been written down by men. The figure of the Virgin Mary appears in Thomas' writing as a symbol of a female experience inaccessible to men and unexpressed in a language whose perspective is predominantly male--a phallogentric language. Maternity is, of course, a uniquely female experience. In "If One Green Bottle..." Mary's experience is neatly caught in a phrase that, significantly, recurs in Thomas' later works: "After the immaculate conception...the maculate delivery" (5). Here Thomas employs a word, "maculate," which is outside the lexicon of patriarchal language, a word describing that feature of Mary's maternity which was beyond the concerns and the language of the men who "wrote it down."

The narrator sees herself and other women, such as Mary, pitted against a patriarchal system. This idea is suggested in the story's first image of a mortal playing chess with a god--playing with fate. The god is personified: male, with "thick lips" and a "monstrous hand" (1). He is "the deus in the machina" (2), the god from whom the speaker repeatedly begs a sign that her suffering is not in vain: that her pain, like Mary's, has a purpose which will validate it in the eyes of society. She imagines her experience as a play controlled by an author and a director, both male; she empathizes with Mary and with Leda, both impregnated without their consent by imperious male gods. Fearful of the coming darkness, she

reminds herself twice that "he promised it would be over before the night" (3). On the level of realism, "he" is probably a doctor; on another level the reader identifies him with the *deus ex machina*, the controlling male god.

But the speaker is also aware that the language of this male power is inadequate to her situation. She repeats his promise, but immediately reflects that it is "Absurd to rely on verbal consolation... clichés so worn they feel like old coins" (3). Throughout the speaker's fragmented, stream-of-consciousness narrative, she makes attempts to change her voice, to modify her language, as if trying to speak in the language approved by the men who both "wrote it down" and expunged all traces of female pain. She apologizes for her pain and fear--"you will excuse me for a moment?" (10), "Forgive me if I've mentioned this before" (13)--and strives for "just the right tone... Abstract speculation on birth... on death... on human suffering in general" (10). She struggles for a detached tone which is able to utter such platitudes as "Suffering is good for the soul." But, as she goes on to say, "the effects on the body are not to be considered" (13). The female voice, the voice of the body struggling with its maculate delivery, rises up to drown out the abstract rational tone.

It would be easy, at this point, to draw a simple distinction between male and female voice. We might assume

that Thomas hears the rational, detached voice of phallogentric, patriarchal language as exclusively the voice of men, while the voice that expresses the physical realities of suffering and childbirth is always a woman's voice. But Audrey Thomas' writing constantly challenges simple binary oppositions, including those between men and women. Such a challenge is found in "If One Green Bottle...." In the same passage in which the speaker strives for an abstract discourse, she suggests a woman as the ideal example of such a tone: "Cleopatra in her robes...her crown....No fear...the asp suckles peacefully and unreprieved" (10). The detached voice here is that of a woman--though a quotation from Shakespeare's play alerts us that Cleopatra's story, like Mary's, was written by a man, and leaves us wondering whether Cleopatra was really as detached about her own death as the literary image suggests. But the narrator does not explore Cleopatra's possible pain and fear as she does Mary's. Instead, she contrasts Cleopatra's detached voice with that of a male character, also from Shakespeare--"Falstaff babbling 'of green fields'" in his deathbed scene in *Henry V* (10). Our sympathy is drawn to the sufferer, regardless of gender; to "the old man... pathetic...deserted...broken" (10). Though this is clearly the story of a uniquely female experience which cannot be told in patriarchal language, we are warned against oversimplifying gender roles into a set of easy

oppositions.

Another cautionary note against such oversimplification is sounded by the presence in the story of a vaguely menacing power, less obvious than the god of fate but perhaps more intriguing. The childhood rhyme, "if you step on a crack, then you'll break your mother's back" (1) is quoted in the story's first paragraph as the speaker imagines herself making a cautious advance, fearful of the consequences. Mother appears again later in the same paragraph. As the speaker visualizes being devoured by the god who, "like a whale... strains...one more bit of plankton, through his teeth," she suddenly and apparently irrelevantly remembers the ivory teeth of her mother's comb (2). In the passage that re-writes the Annunciation, Mary twice wonders about her mother's response to the news. These references suggest at once a need for and a fear of a powerful mother-figure.

In "If One Green Bottle..." the mother-figure appears only briefly, usually in parentheses. She never becomes a character in the story, unlike the speaker's father who makes a brief appearance as a fisherman, annoyed by his daughter's squeamish female response to the fish's struggle. In this anecdotal memory, the father is just another male authority figure, while the mother's power, different, female, subtler, is only hinted at. The same sort of half-buried references to the mother occur in Thomas' first novel, *Mrs. Blood*, but the

power of mother over daughter is not fully explored until later works, most importantly *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. The power of the mother-daughter relationship is, however, present, if only minimally, in these earliest works.

"If One Green Bottle..." experiments with language and reinterprets time-honoured religious/cultural symbols, such as the Virgin Mary, in order to write an experience for which our language has no words--a woman's experience of the body, of her pain, and of pregnancy and failed maternity. This short but powerful story introduces many themes which will recur in Thomas' later work, and signals her intention to write about aspects of female experience seldom touched on in literature.

* * *

The major ideas, imagery, and verbal experimentation of "If One Green Bottle..." occur again in Thomas' first novel, *Mrs. Blood*, published in 1970. The novel is basically an expansion of the short story. The focus of *Mrs. Blood* is broader than that of "If One Green Bottle," in which we knew nothing of the narrator's external life. In the novel, the main character is fleshed out and contextualized: she is the American wife of an Englishman, Jason, who teaches in an African university, the mother of two small children named Nicholas and Mary, and the former lover of a man named Richard.

She herself, however, remains nameless, identifying

herself by the two descriptive pseudonyms with which the novel opens: "Some days my name is Mrs. Blood; some days it's Mrs. Thing" (*Mrs. Blood* 11). Explanations of the distinction between Mrs. Blood and Mrs. Thing are widespread among critics. A reader coming directly to the novel from "If One Green Bottle..." might expect the Mrs. Thing persona to correspond to the detached tone which the short story's speaker sometimes uses: an intellectual "abstract speculation" in male-dominated language. In this view, Mrs. Blood would be the subversive female voice expressing the physical realities of pain and emotion. Much of the book supports this interpretation, but readers have also suggested other possibilities.

Constance Rooke supports the view of Mrs. Blood as the "visceral self" and Mrs. Thing as the "objective, but alienated self" (Rooke, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 335). Audrey Thomas herself uses similar language to describe the narrator's two selves: "there's the visceral woman, Mrs. Blood, and there's the objective distanced woman, Mrs. Thing" (Komisar 59). Joan Coldwell presents a fairly negative view of both Mrs. Blood and Mrs. Thing: Mrs. Thing is "fearful, self-conscious, acted-upon" while Mrs. Blood is a "guilt-ridden bundle of memories and poetic visions" (Coldwell, *Oxford Companion* 785). Elizabeth Potvin agrees with the view of Mrs. Thing as the more rational voice: she describes her as

"woman dominated by the tyranny of her mind." Mrs. Blood, in Potvin's interpretation, is "an object and a victim" (Potvin 39).

Some critics have seen the Mrs. Blood persona more positively. Lorraine McMullen suggests that while Mrs. Thing is "the young wife and mother concerned with present reality," Mrs. Blood is "her more sensual and emotional self" (McMullen 64). Lois Gottlieb and Wendy Keitner, like Coldwell, describe Mrs. Thing as "acted-upon," but "Mrs. Blood, by contrast, might be woman in touch with a universal source of female strength, yet wholly overwhelmed by her reproductive capacity" (Gottlieb and Keitner, "Narrative Technique" 368). The most positive view of Mrs. Blood comes from Frank Davey, who describes Mrs. Thing as a "nervous, incompetent, inconsequential housewife and mother," whose other voice is "the passionately careless 'Mrs. Blood,' whose generosity toward life has often earned her embarrassment and disaster" (Davey, *From Here to There* 255).

All these readings can be supported by the novel. Mrs. Blood exhibits guilt, poetic vision, female strength, and a passionate generosity toward life. Her segments of the book are filled with puns, explorations of word origins and meanings, literary allusions, images of birth and death, and vivid memories, particularly memories of Richard and of the mental hospital where she once worked. Mrs. Thing comments

more rationally on events in the present; she philosophizes, and carries on conversations with others. The two voices are distinct, but not completely different, since their concerns overlap.

One of the characters with whom Mrs. Thing talks is Dr. Biswas, the Indian gynecologist. That their interaction is largely an intellectual exercise supports the identification of Mrs. Thing as the narrator's more detached, cerebral self. She notes that the doctor's "casual attitude toward birth and death is something I can never hope to attain, or maybe don't want to," but, worried that her "brain grows musty from disuse" as her body absorbs all the attention, she welcomes "our daily ritual of talk, where we at least hone the intellect, if nothing more, and realize that there are minds as well as bodies in the world" (*Mrs. Blood* 93).

Mrs. Thing realizes that "Dr. Biswas, intellectual, mystical, Indian, male, will never understand" her pain and self-pity (91). Though he can be gentle and sympathetic towards her, when she tries to express to him her fear of a miscarriage he is "obviously exasperated" and distances himself so that she looks at him and sees "only an alien face--the face of the professional" (121-122). The juxtaposition of "intellectual" and "male" in Mrs. Thing's description of him once again suggests a generalization about men as rational, detached, and objective. Yet, once again, Thomas'

multiple perspective undermines our assumptions about gender, for this is the same Dr. Biswas who says that "at seventeen I was filled with horror by the conditions in my country, and at night I used to weep because of it" (92).

Dr. Biswas, like most Audrey Thomas characters, is more complex than he first appears, but his interaction with the main character remains at the intellectual, abstract level. Mrs. Thing is aware, however, as was the speaker in "If One Green Bottle...", that communication on this level, in male-centered language, cannot adequately express her experience. She knows that the surface-level conversations she and Jason have when he visits are "unreal talk" (96). When, home from the hospital, she tells Jason that the pain has begun again, she observes the way they talk: "Formal. Middle-aged. Controlling the panic by speaking in careful sentences. A sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought. But there are sentences and sentences" (196).

The rational language of sentences, with its conventional grammar and syntax, its traditional narrative structure, becomes as confining as a prison sentence when Mrs. Blood tries to express emotions and experiences that are outside language. Like the character in "If One Green Bottle...", she identifies the powers controlling her fate as male, quoting passages from the Bible and Christian liturgy which reflect a patriarchal view of the world. She recites a prayer for

healing, italicizing the pronouns "he" and "him" to emphasize the masculine orientation of religion, and she remembers the Bible verse which says "In my father's house are many mansions," perhaps because of the masculine image of God the Father it presents. Immediately after these two passages, another biblical allusion appears: "I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me, Write." These biblical quotations and allusions recall the menacing male god of "If One Green Bottle...." In her discussion of that story, Barbara Godard writes, "The biblical myth of the incarnate word invoked here invites us to see the words set adrift because, backed by the fiat of a male God, it is antithetical to women's realities and has become 'empty' for them" (Godard, *Audrey Thomas* 26). If, as in the passage from Revelation quoted above, the male god commands the male prophet to write, how can such writing embody women's experience?

Mrs. Blood can appropriate the command to "Write" and make this phallogocentric language her own only by subverting it. She misquotes the Bible: "All flesh is glass" (*Mrs. Blood* 59), "Give us this day our barely dead" (171), "The bloody and bawd of Christ" (193). Or she distorts the words of the rationalist male philosopher Descartes to reflect her own feelings: "I stink therefore I am" (21). Mrs. Blood's distortions of male-written texts would be refreshing to feminist theorists like Hélène Cixous, who writes that woman

must dislocate the male discourse that has defined her; she must "explode it, turn it around, and seize it...; make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of" (Cixous 257). Mrs. Blood's parodies of the Bible, liturgy, and Descartes are her way of taking language into her own mouth.

Mrs. Blood's voice dominates as the book continues: the voice of Mrs. Thing falters under the pressure of her body's pain. And the voice of Mrs. Blood moves further away from traditional language, traditional narrative. The voice becomes more fragmented and is taken over more and more by random quotations from the Bible, from literature, from newspapers, and from children's rhymes. The final section, the brief Part III in which the miscarriage actually occurs, is made up almost entirely of this kind of found material, and the last six pages consist of short, usually single-sentence, paragraphs. The further Mrs. Blood travels into her traumatic female experience, the more distanced she becomes from rational narrative.

This struggle between female experience and male-centered language, also evident in the shifts and ellipses of "If One Green Bottle...", will be discussed in greater detail when we examine some of Audrey Thomas' later works in which the protagonists are writers who struggle explicitly to use and

misuse phallogentric language for female purposes. At this point, as we examine Thomas' first short story and first novel, this struggle with language indicates the intensity of the experiences being described--intensely female experiences, which are often not the subjects of literature. The contrast between the voices of Mrs. Blood and Mrs. Thing highlights the way in which an experience such as a miscarriage is viewed differently by the woman undergoing it and by the outside world, since Mrs. Thing is more aware of the comments and opinions of those around her.

This "outside world," though it can be described as male-centered, is by no means made up only of men. Though Jason and Dr. Biswas are unable to sympathize fully with her, Mrs. Blood also fears the contempt of other women, specifically of the coolly competent English faculty wives. Chief among these is Mary M., "with her goodness and concern and *bravery* (for hadn't she driven twelve miles with [her son] Benjamin's tongue bitten off and lying there on the car seat...?)" (13). Mary M. and the others can "cope"; Mrs. Blood is constantly aware that she is not one of them, that she does not measure up to their standards of competence. Their visits leave her with the impression "that they find [her] a bit decadent lying here and bleeding the afternoon away." She remembers a similar woman back in England who responded to Mrs. Blood's fear of a miscarriage by telling her own story: "I had a

miscarriage at nine o'clock one New Year's Eve and went to a supper party later in the evening" (29). In the face of this unattainable standard, what can Mrs. Blood/Mrs. Thing say but "I hate them and I want to be like them" (29)?

Mrs. Blood's sense of guilt is increased by the fact that this attitude is expressed by other women, not primarily by men. It might be argued, of course, that the faculty wives' cool competence is the product of the "clean, well-lighted mythology" (66) found in the ladies' magazines the narrator reads in hospital, and that this image of "Life as it should be lived" is in fact a construct of a patriarchal society. Ladies' magazines are a potent symbol in Audrey Thomas' work: they appear again in *Songs My Mother Taught Me* and *Intertidal Life*.¹ Their vision of the ideal life centres on material comfort and convenience, and they present the ideal woman as one who is competent and skilful in handling domestic affairs, possessing a courage and strength that belittles pain and refuses to recognize ugliness. Mrs. Thing suspects that women are actually victims of this mythology: "Is it not sadism of a particularly nasty kind? Can you live up to this woman or that dress or this complicated recipe? And of course you can't" (67). Yet she recognizes that the women who are victimized by this mythology also help to perpetrate it. Thus the cool, competent faculty wives judge Mrs. Blood by ladies' magazine standards, and she cannot hope to find support in a

community of such women.

In fact, although as Mrs. Thing she shares an intellectual communion with Dr. Biswas, the narrator finds only one person who can truly reach out to her and share her experience as Mrs. Blood. This is another woman, but a woman who stands outside the "clean, well-lighted mythology" (66) of European civilization. The African nurse, Elizabeth, appears initially only as another nurse, along with Alexandria, Esther, and Grace Abounding. But as the narrative continues she becomes distinct. It is, of course, in her Mrs. Thing persona that the narrator makes her observations on the people around her, and in this voice she describes Elizabeth:

She has a deep voice, unlike the usual high, nasal semi-whining accent of the other girls.... I think too she is older although it's hard to tell. She does not giggle about Mrs. X's boyfriend the way Esther and Alexandria do and she is not a student like them, but a qualified nurse who trained in England.... I love to hear Elizabeth talk, in much the same way I love the darkest chocolate. (46)

On a few other occasions Elizabeth's character is further sketched: a little less likely to gossip than the other girls, a little more serious, she is "quiet and efficient and gives an impression of incorruptibility" (110). Significantly, she is at her patient's side when Mrs. Blood/Mrs. Thing awakens after a sudden episode of bleeding and fainting.

This characterization of Elizabeth prepares us for her importance in the book's final section. Here, as Mrs. Blood

undergoes the agony of her miscarriage and drifts further away from the rational language of the controlled and controlling sentence, none of the men in her life is present. Jason "comes and holds [her] hand and leaves" (213). She repeatedly asks for Dr. Biswas and receives no answer. The most striking absence of all is that of Richard, "The Man Who Never Was" (217). Though she repeatedly cries out for her lost lover, he exists only in memories.

None of the three men to whom Mrs. Blood cries out comes to her, and the clean, well-lighted world of the Englishwomen is far away. Her only companions in suffering are the African women, especially Elizabeth. Of all those whose names Mrs. Blood cries out in her disjointed, fragmented voice of pain, only Elizabeth responds. Elizabeth is the first person she asks for when she arrives back at the hospital, and though Elizabeth is absent then, she is present during the birth. When the dead infant--"the thing"--is taken away, Elizabeth weeps and holds Mrs. Blood as Esther rubs her belly and Auntie Mary sings. At the end, she is supported by a loving community of women, African women. Elizabeth Potvin points out that Mrs. Blood "has a stronger affinity with Elizabeth, the African nurse, than she does with her husband, and when the miscarriage does finally occur, it is to Elizabeth and not to Jason that she cries out.... Thus it is suggested...that the final reintegration will be achieved through a communion

with other women" (Potvin 45). Elizabeth and the others, as women, are able to move outside patriarchal language and its expectations for women's behavior, while as Africans they may be less bound by the Eurocentric rationality which imprisons Mrs. Blood. As such, they are fit companions for her journey through an experience which cannot be described in rational, male-centered terms.

Outside those boundaries, when Mrs. Blood attempts to speak her own fragmented, distorted female language, she is able to express a whole range of female experiences. These include a joyous celebration of female sexuality, descriptions of the birthing experience, and, of course, the experience she is presently undergoing: the pain and bleeding of her difficult pregnancy.

Central to many of these experiences is the image of blood--so central, in fact, that not only the Mrs. Blood persona but the title of the novel is explicitly identified with it as well. The contrasting attitudes towards blood in the Mrs. Blood and Mrs. Thing passages highlight the attitudes toward female experience, the attitudes that force Mrs. Blood to abandon the tone of abstract speculation and find a new voice to speak what is happening to her.

Although Mrs. Thing begins the novel with a straightforward narrative about her ambulance ride to the hospital, Mrs. Blood takes over after less than four pages and re-tells

the story her way, beginning, "I am here because I bleed" (14). As her name implies, blood is central to her definition of herself as a woman. Blood is the key element in her present hospitalization, as she frequently reminds us by referring to her bloody sheets and bloodstained thighs. Blood also figures prominently in Mrs. Blood's memories of the mental hospital where she used to work. Several of her memories relate to menstruation, and many of these associate menstrual blood with embarrassment or shame. She remembers her embarrassment, as a young girl hitchhiking in Europe, when a truck driver who had given her a ride found a pair of her bloodstained underpants; she recalls the awkwardness of being ushered out of sixth-grade music class because some girl "had found a dirty Kotex underneath her chair. We thought she was disgusting" (163).

As in lingering Old Testament taboos, not only the blood of menses but anything or anyone who comes in contact with it is shameful. Such taboos are, of course, not limited to Judeo-Christian teaching but are found in many cultures. In the Koran, "Blood, like the menstruating woman, is...both sacred and accursed" (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 19). The accursedness survives in modern attitudes to menstruation, in which "The rule behind all others seems to be that women may not draw men's attention to menstruation in any way" (Laws 43). This unwritten rule obviously lies behind Mrs. Blood's

memories of disgust and embarrassment.

But not all her associations with blood involve pain or shame. She remembers also her unabashed sensuality when she made love with Richard while menstruating and he said, "Look, you've cursed my pajamas" (*Mrs. Blood* 3). Richard's attitude toward his lover's menstrual blood is very different from that of the more traditional male to whom "The blood of the menstruating woman is somehow dangerous, magical, and apparently not something he wants to get on his penis" (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 18). Mrs. Blood's experience with Richard provides her with at least one positive memory of menstruation.

Another of her positive reflections on blood occurs when she thinks of the bloody experience of birth, where the mother is "the bloody thing in the bed or on the table" who "smiles and forgets the horror and the outrage" (*Mrs. Blood* 183). Though society's attitudes proclaim that women's blood is shameful, blood must be accepted as an integral part of female experience if Mrs. Blood is to accept herself as a woman.

When the Virgin Mary makes an appearance in this story, it is as "Bloody Mary...the bloody and bawd of Christ, that is to say, bloody Mary, who propelled Him, shrieking, into the musty straw" (193). By emphasizing the bloody aspect of Mary's experience the narrator here, as in "If One Green Bottle...", draws attention to that which is left out of the

written records. Mrs. Blood also uses the Bloody Mary image to subvert the symbolism of traditional religion just as she plays with its language. In *Mrs. Blood*, "If One Green Bottle...", and such later Thomas stories as "Mothering Sunday," the Virgin Mary is a woman whose experience has been written and interpreted by men, specifically the men of the Roman Catholic church. As Marina Warner points out in *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, "The Virgin in the Catholic Church represents motherhood in its fullness and perfection. Yet the Virgin as mother is exempt by special privilege from intercourse, from labour, and from other physical processes of ordinary childbirth" (Warner 192). Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor observe that "The messy femaleness of Mary is dealt with by pretending it is not there" (Sjoo and Mor 351). Mary is thus a two-edged symbol for women: she shares their experience of maternity, yet at the same time condemns their experience for not being "immaculate."

In the early years of the Christian era, when the Church sought to validate itself by absorbing many of the beliefs and practises of pagan religions, many of the powers and attributes of pagan goddesses were credited to Mary. "The practice of honoring Christ's Mother...comes to Western Christianity from the Orthodox Catholic Church, which succeeded in annexing the Oriental rites of mother goddess and fertility" (Kristeva 250). Thus "the feminine moon, who

nourishes life with her beams, was...identified...with the Virgin Mary," who then took over the function of such moon-goddesses as Isis and Diana "whose particular business was the gift and sustenance of life, by rendering women fertile, and easing their pain in childbirth, by bringing plenty to the earth" (Warner 256). Paradoxically, while Mary is "the ultimate of fertility symbols" she is also "a focus for the steeliest asceticism" (274).

The experience of Mrs. Blood is almost an inversion of that of the Virgin Mary, for while Mary produces a child without any of the messy physical realities, Mrs. Blood experiences sex, bleeding, pain and labour but produces no child. By invoking, not the pure Virgin but her own "Bloody Mary," Mrs. Blood may be trying to deconstruct the male-created myth of the Virgin and reach beyond it to the more life-affirming, woman-centered religions it displaced.

A similar deconstruction occurs with the image of blood. So important in Christian symbolism, blood takes on a new, female importance for Mrs. Blood. She applies the language of the mass, the symbols of Christ's body and blood, to her own situation: "They have broken my body and the wine dries sticky on the sheets" (*Mrs. Blood* 21); she wants to "call out to Jason who has no ears, 'This is my body,' and fling back the sheets and cry out to him who has no eyes, 'And this is my blood.' And take his head...and force it down, crying, 'Drink

this, eat this, in remembrance of me'" (91). If it is accepted that, by making blood the symbol of the male Christ, "Christianity distorts...the primeval mystery and terror and blood-rite in which women struggle alone to create and triumph...Christianity...has gained its energy by co-opting and distorting this experience, this fact, these symbols" (Sjoo and Mor 353-354), then Mrs. Blood's positioning herself in the story of Christ may be an attempt to reclaim blood as an essential part of women's experience.

In a similar passage in *Intertidal Life*, Alice reflects on the Anglican ceremony of the Churching of Women, performed after childbirth. She recalls "the blood scent in that room, the women who, under the crisp white coverlets, were placidly bleeding" and contrasts those bleeding women with "the young priest moving awkwardly up and down the rows, sensing our communion to be so much stronger than what he held out in his silver bowl" (*Intertidal Life* 52). As in *Mrs. Blood*, the blood of the mass is associated not with the male Christ but with the female Mary, Mary of the maculate delivery, reclaimed as a fertility goddess. The powerful symbolism of blood allows Mrs. Blood not only to identify with Mary but also to take on the sacrificial Christ-figure role, suggesting that the female reality of blood can be the source of a spiritual strength.

By contrast, Mrs. Thing takes a more detached,

externalized view of blood. She wonders about the African girls' attitude towards menstruation, womanhood, and sexuality. When she begins to bleed again and panics, Elizabeth tells her, "It was nothing. A little flow of blood" (Mrs. Blood 100), and soothes her with a sedative until she too agrees that it was nothing. When she is taken to the lab for a blood test, blood becomes objectified, something to be "siphon[ed] off" (113) and carried in "a little basket of tubes" (114). The man who comes to take blood in her room is "very cheerful" and businesslike with his little tubes, cotton swabs, and blood chart with which he sits, "fitting us all into his patterns" (116). For Mrs. Thing, blood has indeed become a thing, something to be thought about and discussed, analyzed and explained away, siphoned and collected. In the clinical language of the medical profession, blood is a cause neither for celebration nor for suffering.

In her final dissociation from rational language, in the fragmented speech of her miscarriage, Mrs. Blood returns to the powerful, female images of blood. "I say the moon is full of blood," she says, or thinks, and "They've got to do someth. ng about all this blood" (216). She repeats *Macbeth's* admission of guilt: "I am so steeped in blood"; she recalls Old Testament taboos about menstruation and then Richard's delighted "Look, you've cursed my pajamas." The moon is identified with woman, who is indeed "full of blood", and when

Mrs. Blood is at the heart of this uniquely female experience her language is most full of blood.

The novel is an attempt to write one woman's experience of blood, of the uniquely female, of all that is left unspoken in patriarchal language. The bloody experience of maternity is at the centre of this novel, and the aspects of this experience on which Mrs. Blood dwells are those most often glossed over in literature. As the narrator of "If One Green Bottle...." points out, to the men who have written down women's stories, the only aspect of maternity that matters is the successful production of a child, preferably male. The pregnancy of the Virgin Mary is not described, nor is her "maculate delivery" in a stinking stable. In "If One Green Bottle..." and *Mrs. Blood*, the living child, the one element that makes birth worth recording, is removed. Thomas' heroines give birth to "nothing," and the absence of the all-important child shifts the focus to the unspoken, unrecorded aspect of the experience.

This absence also highlights the parallels between birthing and writing in Thomas' work, for the act of giving birth without producing the expected living child parallels the act of writing without producing the expected traditional narrative. In both writing and birthing according to Thomas, the emphasis is on the process, and on the woman who experiences it. This same birthing/writing connection is

explored by Hélène Cixous when she writes: "Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive--all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive--just like the desire to write: a desire to live the self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood" (Cixous 261).

"A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow...but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more her anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world" (John 16:21, KJV). But if no man is born into the world, what then of woman's travail? Is her sorrow, her anguish, even worthy of mention? The Bible, like most patriarchal religion and literature, gives no answer, suggesting that it is not worth recording. This is borne out by women's responses to "If One Green Bottle..." and *Mrs. Blood*. As Audrey Thomas told an interviewer:

Many women have come to me, who have had miscarriages, and said that that story ["If One Green Bottle..."] has meant something to them....There really wasn't anybody talking about the fact that, you know, blush, darling, I'm pregnant & nine months later, you have a dear little baby. But it doesn't always happen, you know, & there's a lot of nasty things that go on in between, & sometimes you don't have the baby or the baby's deformed, or whatever. And in that sense I guess I was really trying to say, look, why don't we talk about these things. (Bowering, "Songs and Wisdom" 14, 15)

Thomas' comment suggests that the women who responded to her description of miscarriage had never before found any literary model to confirm the impact of that experience.

Society seems to view the subject with an attitude similar to that of the Englishwoman who went to a supper party a few hours after her miscarriage.

"If One Green Bottle..." and *Mrs. Blood* testify that the experience goes far deeper than that attitude admits. Though the narrator tries to detach herself from the fetus, to see it as a "thing," she is not able to objectify it fully. Growing inside her, the child is "an animal in me straining to get out" (61), and in a powerful, poetic passage in which *Mrs. Blood* envisions herself as both Christ and Mary, the (male) child is "My Caliban, my dear," "corked up...like a pear in brandy....bobbing against the sides of his prison" (99). The unborn child is real and alive, loved and wanted, though potentially monstrous and destructive. Although *Mrs. Blood's* feelings about her child are ambiguous, she clearly does not regard him or her as merely a thing. When it is all over, her thoughts alternate between the apparently detached, "They are taking the thing away," and the plaintive "My child is dead" (219).

Because the dead child is such a reality to *Mrs. Blood*, society's dismissive attitude is impossible for her to accept. Just as she cannot blithely get up and go to a supper party, so she cannot accept that the fetus is taken away and disposed of, to become "nothing, an excrescence" (183). The dead infant is described as "A Something in a silver bowl. A

Nothing" (219). Like the woman in "If One Green Bottle..." who also rebelled against giving birth to "this nothing" (*Ten Green Bottles* 13), she wonders "what do they do with it afterward...where will they take it? I have no experience in these matters" (*Ten Green Bottles* 9). Yet, even in the supposedly more "primitive" atmosphere of Africa, the clinical attitude prevails, and the fetus simply disappears. The narrator of "If One Green Bottle..." thinks of human fetuses stored in bottles on laboratory shelves, to be used for research or teaching purposes, and wonders if this same fate will befall her infant. The same possibility is mentioned in *Blown Figures*, the sequel to *Mrs. Blood*. Such a fate for the unborn child surely suggests the clinical detachment of the scientific mind, traditionally understood as masculine--indeed, the short story's narrator imagines a male professor using her fetus to teach his class--which is unsympathetic to the woman's need to deal with what has happened to her child. The mother never finds out what happened to the infant; there are no ceremonies or rituals to help her through her grief. One is, presumably, supposed to act as though the whole thing has never happened.

Mrs. Blood compares birth to fishing, in a passage that echoes the narrator's memory of her father fishing in "If One Green Bottle...." She seems obsessed by the idea that once children are "caught" into life, "You cannot throw them back"

(Mrs. Blood 183). The unborn embryo, like an undersized trout, can be disposed of, but in that case it is "thrown back not to thrive and grow but to become nothing" (183). Mrs. Blood's concern over "throwing back" the unborn child looks forward to her impending miscarriage, but also looks back to an event buried in her past.

Throughout the book we know that Mrs. Blood is tormented by memories, particularly memories of Richard who loved her with joyous abandon and then coldly rejected her. She also hints at guilt connected with past events, a guilt which leads her to interpret her present situation as punishment. As she lies in bed, "thinking of something long ago," she feels "I am a victim of my sense of sin," and suggests that she is being punished for not loving her father or for being unfaithful to Jason. But, as she says, she keeps "secrets hidden, like grenades, beneath the pillow" (102-103), and one more secret, perhaps the most significant, is left until the end of the novel to be revealed.

In the final sentences we learn that Mrs. Blood's obsession with Richard is more than a longing for the one truly passionate love of her life, though that passion is certainly important to her definition of herself. But as she repeatedly calls out Richard's name while giving birth to Jason's child, we wonder what his connection is to this experience. This is finally explained in the closing

sentences, when as her dead child is being taken away she recalls a telephone conversation. "Richard, I've got to talk to you. I'm pregnant....'Get rid of it,' he said" (229). This long-ago abortion is apparently responsible for Mrs. Blood's burden of guilt, and as she suffers her miscarriage she is also reliving the death of that other child.

None of this is explicitly detailed in *Mrs. Blood* as it is in *Blown Figures*, which was published in 1974 and can be read as a sequel to *Mrs. Blood*. In *Blown Figures*, the main character is Isobel; her married name is Carpenter. Though she is named, her identity is even more tentative and fragmented than that of Mrs. Blood/Mrs. Thing. Most likely she is called Isobel because the young heroine of *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, published in 1973, is named Isobel Cleary and experiences many of the same childhood events that Mrs. Blood remembers. Since the protagonist of *Blown Figures* is named Isobel and has the same past as Mrs. Blood, peopled by the same cast of characters, we can read all three novels as a trilogy, and see Isobel Cleary, Mrs. Blood/Mrs. Thing, and Isobel Carpenter as one woman. Though a few details differ--the names of some minor characters, for example--the similarities are strong enough to support this reading.

Blown Figures is a huge, complex book, in form the most experimental of all Audrey Thomas' novels. Thomas herself says of it: "The minute your novel is about breaking down,

it's not a novel anymore. It's a book. I write books" (Twigg 249). As Barbara Godard says about *Blown Figures*, "The manipulations of text and context...demand the participation of an attentive reader, who must remember, sift, compare, and contrast the occurrences of a given phrase....The journey is ours as we fabricate the connections, 'make' the story, seek out linear links between points on the journey in hopes of finding formal consolation" (Godard, *Audrey Thomas* 46). In *Blown Figures*, Thomas has pushed her experiments with language to their furthest extent. Throughout the book's 547 pages, most of them blank save for a single sentence or paragraph, we move progressively farther away from traditional narrative, from the rational language that was so inadequate to contain Mrs. Blood's experience of maternity. In this brief treatment of the book, I will concentrate on the ways in which it expands upon the experiences of miscarriage and abortion in *Mrs. Blood*.

In *Blown Figures*, Isobel, Jason, Nicholas and Mary have moved to Canada after leaving Africa. When the novel opens, Isobel is returning alone to Africa. The novel constantly questions the reality of experience and whether Isobel's journey is real at all, and Thomas herself has suggested that the whole thing can be read as the insane ramblings of a schizophrenic Isobel who has been committed to a mental institution "and wishes she'd gone back and made such a

journey and had dealt with the past" (Komisar 59-60). The purpose of Isobel's real or imagined journey to Africa is to confront the unresolved emotions of her miscarriage, which have left her fearing for her sanity, convinced that she is possessed by witches or demons.

For much of the trip, Isobel's travelling companion is a young woman named Delilah, who has had four abortions and is planning a fifth. Though Delilah's approach to life differs from that of the Englishwoman in *Mrs. Blood* who so gallantly recovered from her miscarriage to attend a party on New Year's Eve, Delilah too trivializes what has been a tremendously traumatic experience for Isobel. In fact, Delilah unconsciously echoes that brisk Englishwoman when, immediately after her abortion, she says, "I feel fine. Let's go out tonight. Get dressed up and do the High Life. I'm fed up with all this inactivity" (*Blown Figures* 493).

Delilah does seem to feel that unwanted children can be "thrown back" like undersized fish. As Isobel listens to Delilah's story, the narrator (whose identity is never clear, but who often, as in this passage, seems to be an aspect of Isobel's own consciousness), asks "Where is your baby, Isobel, the one you wanted, your little dead tot?...What happened to your little dead tot whom you last saw curled in the silvery basin? And the other one, Richard's son--where is he now?" (153). This passage establishes the link between Isobel's

earlier abortion and later miscarriage. It also personifies both dead infants--one is a "tot," the other a "son," neither merely a "fetus"--and so underlines Isobel's sense of loss, of a real death and grief. And once again, as in "If One Green Bottle..." and *Mrs. Blood*, it points out the fact that the fetus is simply disposed of as garbage. The suggestion is that this act of discarding the dead child, which denies life, death, and grief, is responsible for much of Isobel's anguish and guilt.

In its language as well as in its plot, *Blown Figures* picks up where *Mrs. Blood* leaves off. The narrative voice is even more fragmented than in the closing passages of *Mrs. Blood*. Here we read with a narrator who seems sometimes to be Isobel, sometimes her creator, sometimes a third party, and who frequently addresses an equally vague figure called "Miss Miller." The entire book is less a narrative than a collage of non sequiturs, quotations and allusions, photographs, comic strips, sections from newspapers reproduced in their original type, and other found material. The intertextual material deliberately counters conventions of the rational, linear narrative. As in *Mrs. Blood*, this type of writing becomes more dominant as the book progresses and as Isobel moves deeper into Africa--and possibly into madness.

That descent into madness at the book's end is open to many possible readings. Isobel returns to the hospital where

she had the miscarriage, asks unsuccessfully for Elizabeth, and inquires after what is done with dead babies. Then, leaving Delilah, she apparently goes to a remote village where she undergoes a ritual of cleansing and exorcism which may or may not be successful. She confesses to being a witch and says, "I ate the child in my womb....Since then I have never been happy" (518). In the bizarre closing passages, the attempt to create a narrative is completely abandoned. Whether Isobel has gone mad, or whether we are to believe that she disappears into the African jungle and discovers some source of female strength as a witch, there is no suggestion that she is restored to sanity and returns to Canada to perform her approved social function as wife and mother. The breakdown of language at the novel's end strongly suggests that Isobel has moved irrevocably beyond the ordered, "Mrs. Thing" world of phallogentric language, and it is perhaps worth noting that she never appears again in an Audrey Thomas work. This may imply that the only way to move outside a male-dominated language is to descend into madness or silence, for *Blown Figures* ends with five blank pages.² Isobel's descent into madness and silence may parallel the experience described by Julia Kristeva as the "shattering of language." "Then, the symbolic covering (constituted by acquired knowledge, the discourse of others, and communal shelter) cracks....An aimless drifting ensues...opening up an infinite

abyss where there are no more words" (Kristeva 162-163).

As we will see in the next chapter, Thomas explores different uses for silence, as well as different possible fates for her heroine, in later works such as *Latakia* and *Intertidal Life*. The artist-mother heroines struggle, as does Isobel, with the demands of language and silence, but they continue the struggle rather than being destroyed by it as Isobel appears to be.

Blown Figures is a sequel to *Mrs. Blood* in that it suggests a possible outcome to Mrs. Blood's trauma over the loss of her child. The event which society regards as scarcely worth mentioning is, for this woman, so devastating that it leads her into madness. Isobel's story is a rejection, not just of patriarchal language and narrative, but of patriarchal society's attempt to prescribe how a woman should respond to an abortion or a miscarriage.

We have already seen the importance of autobiographical material in Audrey Thomas' writing. *Mrs. Blood* and to some extent *Blown Figures* certainly draw upon such material, since Thomas herself experienced a miscarriage while in Africa. She and her husband and children did later move to Canada, and Thomas, like Isobel, returned alone to Africa a few years later. The purpose of Thomas' trip was ostensibly to gather material for a new novel. Though Isobel may have gone mad and perhaps never even returned to Africa, Audrey Thomas does make

her return journey in the writing of *Blown Figures*, and the act of writing may be her own exorcism of the ghosts of the past. As readers, we are not told directly what private quest she may have been on or what personal encounters she may have had. But obviously Audrey Thomas' return journey to Africa did not end with her disappearing into the jungle or being committed to an insane asylum. *Blown Figures* shows Thomas' ability to begin with a personal experience and move beyond it into the realm of what-might-have-been.

In a later short story, Audrey Thomas produces yet another version of the story of the white woman having a miscarriage in Africa. After *Blown Figures*, Thomas seemed to have finished with the idea of the miscarriage, as she had with the character of Isobel and with the African setting. Except for a few African stories in her 1977 collection, *Ladies and Escorts*, Thomas moved on to find new settings as well as new characters and themes--including, as we will see, different approaches to the idea of maternity in women's lives and in their definitions of themselves. However, in her 1990 collection, *The Wild Blue Yonder*, Thomas includes a story called "The Slow of Despond" which shows her experimenting further with this original plotline.

The heroine of "The Slow of Despond" is Sarah MacLeod who, as an American student in Scotland, meets and marries a young man who wants to go to Africa as a missionary. Though

Sarah is not a believer, she loves Gordon so much that she chooses to adapt her lifestyle to his and goes with him to Africa.

We know from the beginning of the story that the marriage does not succeed, for in the opening scene Sarah is middle-aged, alone in Edinburgh, wearing her wedding ring only one day a year, and reading in a newspaper that her ex-husband and his present wife are in the city giving a lecture. The story does not unfold in chronological order but rather in the apparently random order of Sarah's memories, linked by a logic of emotion rather than of chronology and causality. This technique is typical of many of Audrey Thomas' later works. They appear to be told in a more traditional narrative form than such works as *Blown Figures*, where she is experimenting with language and form, but these later stories subvert traditional narrative in subtler ways through their use of time and their exploration of memory. "The Slow of Despond" is an excellent example of this use of time-shifts.

Knowing as we do that Sarah and Gordon MacLeod's marriage does not succeed, readers may be tempted to guess what caused their separation. As we learn of their early courtship and very different backgrounds, we may be led to expect that these differences caused the marriage to fail--that the young Presbyterian minister would be too puritanical, too inhibited sexually, to respond to his wife's desire, or that Sarah would

be unable to bear the strain of living in Africa as a missionary of a faith she did not profess.

But Sarah's first memory of Africa, evoked by the smell of palm trees in the Botanic Gardens, shows herself and Gordon snug in their house in Africa, busy with the life of the mission and obviously in love with each other, only dimly aware of drums announcing a death at the nearby Catholic mission. In this scene Sarah is pregnant with their first child, and we discover that Gordon, unlike many of the husbands in Thomas' novels, is not repulsed by his wife's maternity, but likes "to put his face against her belly and wait for the baby to kick or shift position" (*Wild Blue Yonder* 23). Immediately after this memory of their life in Africa comes another memory, chronologically out of sequence but thematically appropriate, this time of their honeymoon. The descriptions of their uninhibited lovemaking are more reminiscent of the scenes with Richard from *Mrs. Blood* than most of the husband-wife relationships in Thomas' writing. Thus far, it appears that this unlikely couple will be happy together despite all the odds.

Then, abruptly, the words "The baby was born dead" (24) intrude into this idyllic reverie. After the stillbirth, the story is retold, beginning with Sarah's memory of first meeting Gordon. The second part of the story parallels the first: we see Sarah and Gordon happy together, deciding to

marry despite their religious differences. Sarah's memories then drift back to the church of her childhood and the Bible she received at her confirmation, "an Oxford Self-pronouncing Bible, Illustrated, with Questions and Answers" (27). The image of this Bible, perhaps an indicator of the orderly, straightforward religion by which Gordon lives, is followed immediately by the sentence, "The second baby came months too soon" (27).

After the death of her second child, Sarah becomes very disturbed and Gordon takes her back to Scotland. There, she recovers and becomes pregnant again, this time giving birth to a healthy child. But when Gordon makes plans for them to return to Africa, Sarah, fearing for her three-month-old son's survival in the African climate, kills the baby as they are about to leave. Sarah's memories end abruptly at this point, and the story jumps forward to the present, apparently many years later, where Sarah, divorced and living on an income presumably provided by Gordon, is a figure of some mystery to her neighbours in Edinburgh.

It is interesting to note that in the breakdown following the second baby's death, Sarah suffers many of the same symptoms as does Isobel in *Blown Figures*. Sarah finds that "Certain words detached themselves from ordinary conversation and floated on the wall above her head: 'Knife,' for example, or 'fever' or 'blood'" (*Wild Blue Yonder* 28). Isobel is

disturbed by "The burned-out SHELL sign on the Oak Street bridge, the name EDGE suddenly at the end of someone's drive" (*Blown Figures* 218). Both find reading difficult: Sarah finds that the letters on the page swarm like ants (*Wild Blue Yonder* 28), for Isobel "The letters jumped around the page like fleas" (*Blown Figures* 137). The African children's rhyme that begins "Zacharias stole the meat from the cookin' pot" (*Wild Blue Yonder* 28), which is also quoted in *Mrs. Blood* (*Mrs. Blood* 214), becomes intolerable to Sarah MacLeod after the "meat" has twice been stolen from the "cooking pot" of her womb. For Sarah, as for Mrs. Blood/Isobel, language becomes dangerous; words are terrifyingly powerful. "When Gordon talked about Acts of God she told him she saw a golden axe, that this was the Axe of God, and that she was being punished" (*Wild Blue Yonder* 28). Once again the language of patriarchal religion threatens and alienates a woman who cannot speak it. Despite the apparent helpfulness of the Self-pronouncing Bible, the language of Gordon's religion is as foreign to Sarah as it is to the African girl Comfort, whose mispronunciation of "The Slough of Despond" from *Pilgrim's Progress* is the source of the story's title.

As the image of the Axe of God indicates, Sarah also suffers from guilt. Unlike Mrs. Blood's feelings of guilt, Sarah's are never assigned to a specific cause. Yet without our ever knowing what she feels guilty about, we sense that

her guilt, like Mrs. Blood's, is tied to a particular incident. She tells Gordon that she is being punished, "But she did not tell him why" (*Wild Blue Yonder* 28), and she insists that the "punishment" is directed at her, not at both of them as he suggests.

In these and many other ways this story has much in common with that of Mrs. Blood/Isobel. Blood is also important in "The Slow of Despond": blood on the sheets in the honeymoon hotel, blood pouring down Sarah's legs during the miscarriage, loss of blood blamed for her depression. Her ability to love Gordon is tied to blood: "All her love for her husband came flowing back, as though it had gone out with the haemorrhages and was now built up again, like her red blood cells" (29).

"The Slow of Despond," however, addresses itself more directly to the role of religion in women's experience. Mrs. Blood uses the liturgy and symbols of Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism, and the words of the Bible, to show how the language and symbolism of Christianity are male-oriented. We never sense, however, that Mrs. Blood has any direct connection to the church, only that its male-centered images of women and their experiences have dominated Western society to such an extent that the attempt to write women's experience will inevitably have to confront those images. In "The Slow of Despond" the religion is Scots Presbyterian and Sarah has

a far more personal encounter with the practical realities of that religion when she tries to make her own independent agnosticism co-exist with Gordon's firm conviction. Though she sets out to keep her religion and Gordon's separate but equal, Sarah in effect becomes colonized by Gordon's faith, accompanying him to Africa and teaching in his mission school, trying to see God as Gordon sees Him. "What did he see when he said the word 'God,' the words 'Our Father.'...He tried to explain. He kissed her" (26).

But Gordon's religion, Gordon's Father God, cannot heal the wounds of Sarah's thwarted motherhood. Though Gordon tries to be supportive, even his love is inadequate. Though Sarah is able to share her feelings with him after the loss of her first child, nursing him at her "flowing breasts" (25), she feels distanced from him after the loss of the second child. Her only real support comes from other women. After the first child is stillborn, Sister Patricia comes from the Catholic mission to see Sarah. One might expect that Sister Patricia, as a celibate woman and a representative of the Roman Catholic Church, would have little consolation to offer Sarah. But she openly admits her inability to empathize, and performs a small physical act of kindness, "bath[ing] Sarah's face and rubb[ing] her temples with lemony smelling cologne" (24) just as the African nurse rubbed Mrs. Blood's belly after her dead child was born. Sister Patricia comforts Sarah not

with the expected words of her own religion but with the African tradition of the ghost mother, who waits on the "other side" to reclaim the stillborn child. Similarly, the aptly named African girl, Comfort, gives Sarah an Akua'ba doll, a traditional fertility symbol, when she is pregnant with the third child.

Although these African traditions (both known to Isobel in *Blown Figures* [*Blown Figures* 324, 311]) encourage Sarah, she does not wish to return to Africa with her child. No mention is made of a conflict between Gordon and Sarah on this point; it is simply assumed that they will return. But Sarah's desperation suggests that Gordon's duty to God is more important to him than his wife's needs. As Sarah prepares to take the child's life, she thinks of Gordon "inside, surrounded by old friends and colleagues, people who believed the way he did. He'd be all right, he had his faith" (30).

Gordon's faith, presumably, is what leads him to divorce Sarah, return to Africa, and eventually marry a woman whose religious views are probably more in keeping with his own. Sarah and Gordon's apparently happy marriage cannot survive the strain of Sarah's madness, perhaps because Gordon's commitment to God is stronger than his commitment to her. Whether or not Gordon is "all right" the story does not tell, but clearly Sarah sees herself and the child as being "outside" the circle of faith which surrounds Gordon, out

where the Self-pronouncing Bible does not provide Answers to Questions and where she must create her own meaning.

* * *

Before we move away from Thomas' explorations of "failed" maternity and its relationship to language, we will look briefly at the one story in which Audrey Thomas describes the experience of a woman who has chosen to have an abortion. Abortion is present, as we have seen, in the background of many stories. It is the source of Mrs. Blood/Isobel's guilt and contributes to the trauma of her miscarriage. Sarah McLeod's act of infanticide is perhaps a sort of abortion-after-the-fact, as she takes the child's life in the belief that she is sparing him--and herself--future pain. And Alice, the heroine of *Intertidal Life*, is haunted by the memory of a past event which is only briefly referred to and described in similar terms to Mrs. Blood's miscarriage: "all those vast quantities of blood, and the little dead thing in the basin..." (*Intertidal Life* 189). Since the text implies that this experience occurred before Alice's marriage to Peter, it more likely refers to an abortion than to a miscarriage. Just as Mrs. Blood does not speak of her abortion until the very end of the novel, so Alice "was dumb to tell about" the effect of her abortion on her (190). This suggests that abortion, perhaps even more than miscarriage, is an experience women find difficult to write or speak about, an experience for

which they find language inadequate.

Appropriately, the story, "The More Little Mummy in the World," from *Ladies and Escorts* (1977), takes place in Mexico, with a main character for whom Spanish is a foreign language that requires constant attempts at translation. The title comes from a museum guide's halting translation of a Spanish phrase which actually means "the smallest mummy in the world" (145). But the awkward literal translation reminds us of the problematic, non-transparent nature of language and its relationship to experience.

The story's main character, Rachel, is a North American woman travelling alone in Mexico. As she visits a Mexican cemetery and a mummy museum, she recalls her love affair which has just ended and the abortion she has recently had. The abortion appears to have been her own choice: instead of the harsh "Get rid of it" of *Mrs. Blood*, we have her reflection that "It was as though once she had decided she didn't want it he had washed his hands of the whole affair" (*Ladies and Escorts* 140). Like the word "mummy," the word "affair" here implies another level of meaning. We learn that her lover washed his hands not just of her pregnancy but also of the entire relationship.

The problem of being in a foreign country with little knowledge of the language permeates this story, a symbolic signifier for the wider problem of communication between the

sexes, between generations, between any two individuals. A conversation between Rachel, her lover, and the lover's friend, Peter, explores the difficulties of communication between people of different ages--a pertinent problem in this relationship where, as we learn, the woman is much younger than the man. The lover relates an encounter he had with a younger man on a bus in which he realized that the phrase "Mushroom Cloud," so charged with meaning for him, meant nothing to the younger man. When Rachel challenges his statement that "When I talk about Marlene Dietrich I don't know if you even know who I mean" (136), he points out that the name "Marlene Dietrich" signifies something different to each of them, because of the differences in their experiences.

The graves in the Mexican cemetery indicate that a number of people with American names have lived and died in this foreign country, many, probably, marrying Mexicans. Rachel meets an American who tells her that the Mexican people "want our money but they hate us. They would prefer if we just mailed it down" (144). The sense of culture shock, of conflict between different cultures, is always present in this story. Rachel notices the different attitude toward death as evidenced by the souvenir vendors outside the mummy museum, the unfamiliar religious symbols and ceremonies. Most striking of all is the difference in language, highlighted by the Spanish phrases interspersed throughout the story--some

translated, some not.

Since the scenes of Mexico are juxtaposed with Rachel's memory of her affair and the unkindness of her lover, we understand that Rachel and her lover are also foreigners to one another, unable to speak each other's language. In its emphasis on the failure of communication and in its use of foreign languages to explore that failure, this story looks forward to Thomas' novel *Latakia*, whose protagonist is also named Rachel. This short story, however, has the added element of an abortion, the catalyst to the final break-up of the relationship. Rachel's lover treats her with almost unbelievable callousness when he brings her home from the hospital, ignoring her pain and nausea as she leaves the hospital, and asking her when they get home to "rustle...up some dinner" for himself and his sons before they leave on their camping trip (145). His inability to understand or communicate with her is so complete that they might as well be speaking different languages. He who would be such an enthusiastic tourist in Mexico is a complete foreigner in the world of women where an abortion may be a traumatic event even if the woman herself chooses to have it. Small wonder that he says, "somehow I always seem to fuck it up--my relationships with women" (140).

Rachel's reaction to "the more little mummy in the world" is reminiscent of the narrator of "If One Green Bottle..."

thinking of human fetuses stored in laboratory bottles. The infant or fetus on display is depersonalized, turned into an object to be studied or stared at, and this is difficult for the woman who has just lost her child to accept. But Rachel cannot communicate any of this to the man who does not speak her language, and so she is reduced to silence: "She wrote him letter after letter and tore them all up" (144).

The postcard she buys at the mummy museum--apparently bearing the picture of "the more little mummy in the world"--provides a means for her to communicate with her ex-lover. She plans to write the standard postcard message--"Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here" (146). This time-worn cliché is open to a number of possible interpretations, and the picture on the postcard, along with the history of the relationship, will ensure that the phrase conveys a number of different messages for both sender and receiver. Rachel is able to break her silence by subverting a traditional means of communication, although, in an ending typical of Audrey Thomas' short stories, we are not told whether the postcard is ever actually written and mailed. For Thomas' heroines, the act of sending is more important than whether men receive their messages, for in sending these messages women write themselves into story; naming our experience makes them real.

* * *

In the next chapter we will see how Audrey Thomas writes

the experience of women who have children and who struggle to define themselves beyond the stereotypical roles society allows for mothers. Before leaving the stories on childbirth to look at stories about women who have already given birth, we might ask whether Thomas has ever written anything about a successful birth--a birth that ends with a living child rather than with a miscarriage or a stillbirth. Though the examples of failed maternity are more striking because they focus attention on the usually unspoken aspects of the experience, Thomas has written a few passages vividly describing the birth of a living child. Among the most significant of these are a passage from *Blown Figures*, and some references in *Intertidal Life*, a novel that will be examined in more detail in a later chapter.

In *Blown Figures* Isobel remembers the birth of her first child, aptly named Mary--or perhaps we might say the narrator reminds Isobel, for here, as throughout the novel, the roles of narrator and character blend into one another. The memory of Mary's birth is a happy one--Isobel wears her "warm flannel nightgown the color of turquoises and laughter" on that "joyous first night" (*Blown Figures* 394).

But during the night her blood stains the gown, and an encounter with Jason's mother makes her ashamed of her own blood. Jason's mother, in both *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures*, is the example *par excellence* of the competent, unemotional

Englishwoman by whom Isobel is so intimidated. Isobel now realizes that her embarrassment was wrong, that she allowed Jason's mother's values to become more important than her own. "Why embarrassed, Isobel, why EMBARRASSED? Such rich red blood, so important to the beautiful child, your child and Jason's....The blood was a sign, an emblem--WHY EMBARRASSED?...You should have kept it to show Jason. The two of you should have rubbed your faces in it, a new birth, a communion" (394). Instead, she allows her blood to be robbed of its meaning and to become a "thing," a source of shame. Jason's mother's world of "spotless sheets" has deprived Isobel of her joy in Mary's birth, and, we suspect, of much of the joy of her marriage as well.

Alice, the heroine of *Intertidal Life*, is a stronger, more self-aware character than Isobel, and she remembers the births of her three daughters with no trace of embarrassment. In her memory, as in Isobel's, blood is the central image: "The mother remembers how it was, how it seemed as though the child might be scalded by the blood which boiled and bubbled between her legs" (*Intertidal Life* 51). Her memory of her first daughter's birth is positive: "Birth had been so strange, painful and exciting" (250) but is marred by her anger at her husband, Peter, for not being present. Alice and Peter's relationship is almost exactly parallel to Isobel and Jason's, but Alice responds more forcefully to her experience.

Rather than let anyone, even Peter, take away the significance of what she has just been through, Alice in her flannel nightgown sits up in bed, "the thick blood flowing still between her legs, triumphant" (251) and exorcises her need "to talk, to tell someone" by writing a letter to her newborn daughter describing the birth, writing her experience into language. In the end she is silenced by her fear of Peter and his mother, for she destroys the letter in fear that either of them might find and read it. Again, as with Rachel's postcard, writing it is the important act. But the memory remains vivid, and years later, when Peter feels he has missed something by not being present at his daughters' births, Alice responds with anger: "There's a lot of blood....Blood blood blood blood blood blood. All over the white sheets. Like an accident in the snow" (252).

In these live births as in the tragic miscarriages of the other stories, blood remains a key element of the experience, an emblem of all the pain the woman endures and the joy she feels. In both Isobel's and Alice's stories, however, other people fail to understand the importance of the birth experience. The event is ultimately a lonely one, one for which the woman must create her own meaning. If she wants to escape the script which has already been written for her, she must write her own story in blood.

We have seen how Audrey Thomas' stories, beginning with "If One Green Bottle...", are attempts to write the female experience, the author's own experience, of childbirth. Miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion are frequent themes in these stories, partly because these "parodies" of the birth experience, as Thomas has called them (Bowering, "Songs and Wisdom" 15), have often been neglected in literature and Thomas obviously felt a need, both on her own behalf and on that of other women, to write about such events. Such non-births are also appropriate topics because the woman's labour does not produce the expected, socially acceptable result, the (ideally male) child. The emphasis thus shifts from the product of birth to the often-ignored process of birth. Similarly, in Thomas' stories the emphasis is not on the expected product--a traditional narrative--but on the writing process through which the subversive female voice struggles to define its experience in language.

After *Blown Figures*, the emphasis in Thomas' writing shifts away from the experience of childbirth, but the emphasis on women's struggle to write their own stories continues. In the next chapter, we will see how women define themselves as mothers, lovers, and writers in *Real Mothers*, *Latakia*, and *Intertidal Life*.

NOTES ON CHAPTER ONE

¹ Thomas is not the only writer to use women's magazines to illustrate society's expectations about women's values, interests and morality. Another writer who frequently refers to such magazines is Margaret Atwood, in such works as *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle*, and *Wilderness Tips*.

² The page layout of *Blown Figures* referred to here, with only a few sentences on most pages and five blank pages at the end, is found in the original edition, published in 1974 by Talonbooks. A later edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975) eliminates the blank or mostly-blank pages, printing several short items together on a page. This condenses the book's unwieldy length, but the powerful impact of the blank pages is lost.

CHAPTER TWO

"WRITING WELL": MOTHERS, LOVERS AND WRITERS IN *REAL MOTHERS*, *LATAKIA*, AND *INTERTIDAL LIFE*

If Audrey Thomas' stories about birth indicate a need for women to rewrite the stories that men have written down about them, her stories about women who are both mothers and writers show them in the act of doing this. These women, as writers, celebrate language while they struggle with it in an effort to tell their own stories. In the fictions we will examine in this chapter, which include short stories from *Real Mothers* and the novels *Latakia* and *Intertidal Life*, the autobiographical parallels are again clear.

After the publication of *Blown Figures* in 1974, Audrey Thomas, unlike Isobel Carpenter, did not disappear, either into an African jungle or into an insane asylum. Separated from her husband in 1972, Thomas continued to live mostly on British Columbia's Galiano Island, raise her three daughters, and write. As she continued to explore the act of writing women's experience of motherhood through the use of autobiographical material, she naturally wrote about women whose experiences more closely paralleled her own than did the final escapades of Isobel.

Beginning with the novel *Latakia* in 1979 and continuing with *Real Mothers* (1981) and *Intertidal Life* (1984), Audrey Thomas' heroines tend to be, like Thomas herself, middle-aged,

divorced mothers. Thomas has three daughters; most of the women in her stories have daughters rather than sons, and the family structures in *Latakia* and *Intertidal Life* are identical to Thomas' own. Perhaps most important in view of Thomas' interest in the relationship between language and experience, many of these women are writers. They share Thomas' concern with recording experience, including the experience of motherhood, in language that is often inadequate for the task.

Even the mothers in stories such as "Real Mothers" and "Harry and Violet," who are not identified as professional writers, share Thomas' concern with storytelling. All these women, whether professional writers or not, struggle to write the story of their own lives, to define themselves. Often the emphasis is on creating identities for themselves outside the narrow roles defined for women by patriarchal discourse. Thomas is interested, too, in the power of words, of labels, to define us. The women in these stories struggle with being "mother," "lover," "writer": they seek to define those words in ways that will allow them freedom and fulfilment, and to reject definitions that restrict them.

Audrey Thomas also focuses attention on the positive relationship between motherhood and writing, the way in which maternal nurturing can be seen as an analogy for the creative act of writing. Lorna Irvine finds in *Intertidal Life* "the conflation of giving birth and writing books, a logical

conflation for women" and observes that "For Thomas...creative space and time are always connected with mothers and children" (Irvine, "Sailing the Oceans" 286, 291). As Linda Hutcheon observes, "Writing in [*Intertidal Life*]...is explicitly connected with pregnancy and birth," although "these female functions--pregnancy, giving birth, mothering--are inevitably ambivalent functions for the female as artist" (Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* 116-117). The ambivalence may lie in the fact that these experiences foster creativity, yet leave women with little time for actual writing or art.

Although the exploration of language and experience continues in Thomas' work after *Blown Figures*, the style of writing changes. Most (though not all) of Thomas' later work is closer to the tradition of the realist novel or short story than "If One Green Bottle...", *Mrs. Blood*, or *Blown Figures*. It is true that Thomas wrote realist stories before *Blown Figures*: some of the stories in *Ten Green Bottles* are quite traditional in form, and *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, published in 1973 although most of it was written earlier, is probably her most realistic novel. Nor does experimentation with form cease after *Blown Figures*: *Latakia*, though easier to read than *Blown Figures*, is very much a postmodern novel.

Looking at Thomas' work as a whole, though, we might wonder if a clear distinction does exist between the more "postmodern" work¹ and her more traditionally realist writing,

with the latter tending to predominate after *Blown Figures*. And if such a distinction exists, what does it mean? Susan Rudy Dorscht, in her thesis "Blown Figures and Blood: Towards a Feminist/Poststructuralist Reading of Audrey Thomas' Writing" suggests that such a distinction does exist. She does not define it in terms of a chronological trend in Thomas' writing, perhaps because her thesis was completed in 1985, before the publication of two volumes of Thomas' short stories which are generally in the same realist mode as *Real Mothers* and *Intertidal Life*.

Rudy Dorscht argues that Audrey Thomas' writing falls into two distinct stylistic categories which reflect two different theoretical approaches.² She suggests that Thomas' "expressive realist" writing, as found in such works as *Songs My Mother Taught Me* and *Intertidal Life*, reflects the same theoretical approach as what she calls the "consciousness raising feminism" of Anglo-American feminists, which looks to women writers to express women's experience. This is the critical assumption underlying such responses as that of Alex Kates Shulman in her review of *Songs My Mother Taught Me* for *Ms.* magazine. She writes "I welcome each new document that can help fill in what's been missing from the record" of women's childhood experiences (Shulman 34). In taking this approach, Anglo-American feminists assume a unified subject/speaker and a transparent relationship between

language and experience which would make such expression possible.

It is perhaps this type of women's writing that Linda Hutcheon has in mind when she writes that women's writing may "appear more conservative" than that of postmodern, poststructuralist male writers, but that this apparent preference for more traditional narrative stems from the fact that "Women must define their subjectivity before they can question it; they must first assert the selfhood they have been denied by the dominant culture" (Hutcheon 6). Nancy K. Miller expresses a similar idea when she responds to poststructuralist disregard for the author's identity by saying "Only those who have it can play with not having it" (Miller 118).

But, as Susan Rudy Dorscht goes on to point out, another branch of feminism, led by the new French feminists and influenced by poststructuralist theory, centres on the need to question and challenge the whole notion of subjectivity. From this perspective, "male" and "female" identities are not inherent in nature, but are socially constructed. This type of feminism recognizes the shifting, multiple nature of the self, which is created only through language. Audrey Thomas' more experimental work, such as *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures*, explores the problems of subjectivity and language. "The obsession with language suggests strongly that as much as her

work is concerned with articulating female experience, it is concerned also with questioning how 'female experience' acquires 'meaning' at all" (Rudy Dorscht 91-92).

I agree with Susan Rudy Dorscht that Audrey Thomas' writing not only expresses female experience, as the Anglo-American feminists believe women's writing should, but also explores the poststructuralist idea "that words and texts have no fixed or intrinsic meanings, that there is no transparent relationship between them and ideas or things, no basis or ultimate correspondence between language and the world" (Scott 135). Nothing in Thomas' writing suggests an overt interest in French feminist theory, and statements like "those goddamned postmodernists" (Wachtel, "Interview" 55) indicate a (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) aversion to theory. But when Audrey Thomas says "When I point out the word other in mother, to me that's a political statement" (Twigg 251), she alerts the reader that she is aware of the significance her explorations of language have in the context of feminist theory. Unlike Susan Rudy Dorscht, I find this preoccupation with the relation between language and experience not just in an overtly experimental book like *Blown Figures*, but in all Thomas' writing.

Certainly a distinction does exist in Audrey Thomas' work between her more overtly experimental writing and that which appears to follow a more traditional narrative form. In her

most recent work, as represented by *Intertidal Life* and the stories in the two subsequent collections, *Goodbye Harold*, *Good Luck* and *The Wild Blue Yonder*, Thomas is working more within the framework of realism. However, it is difficult to chart a clear chronological progression from one type of writing to another, since many stories in *Ten Green Bottles* are traditional in form, as is *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. In recent years Thomas may have become more interested in the potential for subverting traditional narrative in her more "expressive realist" stories. Her use of time and point of view always challenges the assumptions and traditions of the realist mode, and the wordplay and fascination with language are constantly present. Even in those works which appear to be most centered on a unified subject/speaker and to follow a traditional narrative line, Audrey Thomas is never a naive realist, for she always displays an awareness of the power of language which is associated with, though by no means limited to, postmodern writers. She questions the ability of language to communicate experience, and explores its role in the creation of the self. Most important, Thomas' interest in retelling stories allows her to question the notion of the unified subject/speaker, by creating a variety of heroines who may all be identified as the same woman--possibly Thomas herself.

Among the stories Thomas tells and retells in *Real*

Mothers, Latakia, and Intertidal Life are those which centre on the conflict between woman's role as mother and her needs as a sexual being. This concern is present in *Blown Figures*, where Isobel remembers that Jason seemed to be repulsed by her pregnancy. She remembers "his obvious fear of her swelling body" (*Blown Figures* 215) when she was pregnant with Mary, and chides herself for another incident: "You put his hand on your belly--there--so that he could feel the baby kick. Frightened, he drew his hand away. And you, you fool, you never thought to kiss it and put it back again" (219). After three pregnancies have "left the skin on her belly like a wrinkled, rumpled bed" Isobel is ashamed of her body.

If just once he had gone down on his knees and kissed her there, had buried his beautiful head in her strange, apple-wrinkled belly and said 'I love you' or 'It doesn't matter' or (dreamer) 'I like it that way,' then perhaps she too could have looked on herself with renewed eyes. Instead she covered herself and turned away from him. (341)

Alice, in *Intertidal Life*, notes a similar response in

her husband. "I think...that the minute I became a mother he was unable to love me anymore...because he hated his own [mother]" (*Intertidal Life* 154). Like Isobel's Jason, Alice's husband Peter finds pregnancy unattractive, and could not be present at his daughters' births. With the possible exception of Gordon MacLeod in "The Slow of Despond," most of the husbands in Thomas' stories share the Jason/Peter attitude towards their wives' maternity. For the woman, a conflict is

immediately established between her definition of herself as mother and her identity as her husband's lover, and, more importantly, as a sexual being in her own right.

This same conflict arises in a different form for the many Audrey Thomas characters who are divorced, middle-aged mothers. These women face a conflict when they try to balance sexual relationships with their responsibilities as mothers. The conflict lies not so much in the fact that "mother" and "lover" are two mutually exclusive roles that the woman must play, but rather that they are two ways of defining herself. The different "selves" within her are partly socially constructed, partly natural, and the conflict often lies in not knowing where the natural self ends and the socially constructed identity begins. Thomas' 1981 collection *Real Mothers* contains two stories specifically concerned with this conflict.

The title story, "Real Mothers," indicates a move away from Thomas' usual autobiographical perspective in that, though the mother is obviously a woman of the author's own generation with many of the same problems and concerns as other Thomas heroines, the story is actually told from the point of view of her teenage daughter. Of all the stories Audrey Thomas has written about middle-aged single mothers, this is the only one in which the daughter, not the mother, is the protagonist. As we will see in the next chapter when we

look at mother/daughter relationships in Thomas' writing, this represents a significant departure from the way such relationships are usually portrayed in her fiction. "Real Mothers" also provides an interesting starting point from which to examine the conflict between the woman's identity as mother and as lover.

In "Real Mothers," Marie-Anne's parents have divorced after seventeen years of marriage and three children. Her mother, Helen, decides to get on with her life by going to Weight Watchers and returning to university. Her children are supportive, and, for a while, family life seems almost as idyllic as it did before the divorce. All this changes when Helen acquires a live-in boyfriend, a younger man named Lionel who disrupts the family environment. Lionel smokes dope, is rude to Marie-Anne and her little sister Patty, and, worst of all, absorbs the mother's attention until seven-year-old Patty is driven to say, "She's not a real mother anymore....She doesn't love anybody but that jerk Lionel" (*Real Mothers* 18).

Of course, behind that statement lies the question, "What is a real mother?" The phrase is open to a wide variety of interpretations. One is suggested by the cover art of *Real Mothers*, a highly caricatured painting of a 1950s ladies'-magazine scene, mother and daughter wearing identical heart-sprinkled ruffled aprons, golden curls and sickly-sweet smiles, rolling out pastry dough at the kitchen table. The

painting at once evokes and parodies a definition of motherhood constructed within patriarchal discourse, reminding the reader of the "clean, well-lighted mythology" of the ladies' magazines that so disturbed Mrs. Blood (*Mrs. Blood* 66). Yet the children in the short story "Real Mothers" do not expect their mother to fulfil that image of the stay-at-home housewife. They encourage her to go back to school and they all share household responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning. What, then, do the words "real mother" signify for this family?

After her parents have separated, Marie-Anne looks back on their life as a family "as if someone had been telling her a continuous fairy story--or a long and beautiful lie. Or had she told it to herself?" (12). In the "fairy story" of family life as Marie-Anne recalls it, her parents' arguments have been edited out and only memories of happy times remain. Her father remembers the same period of time in a radically different way: "We spent seventeen years as vegetables" (10). Marie-Anne and her father have each told themselves a story which emphasizes the things they wish to remember and which leaves out the elements that do not fit their respective narrative paradigms.

We are not told how the mother, Helen, remembers her seventeen years of marriage, but her determination to write her own story, to define herself as an independent woman

rather than an "ex-wife," is evident when she tells the children "that her 'mourning period' was over and she was damn well going to do something with her life" (13). The children enthusiastically participate in their mother's attempt to "do something" and a new period of family happiness begins. As Coral Ann Howells points out,

The father's desertion...brings them more closely together with their mother at the centre, and plainly the family can absorb a variety of changes in routine with their mother going on a diet and going back to school so long as she belongs only to them and fulfils her traditional role as (deserted) wife and mother. (Howells, "No Sense of an Ending" 115).

Marie-Anne recognizes that all this family happiness is, in a sense, just as much a fiction as was their happiness before the separation. When she sees her mother and Patty carving a Hallowe'en pumpkin she knows that this scene has been set up to impress her father with how well her mother is "coping" (10). Still, after having "felt cold for over a year," Marie-Anne now begins "to feel warm again" (16). She responds positively to the story her mother is constructing because it places Marie-Anne and the other children at the centre of their mother's life in the reconstructed family.

But, like the fairy-tale of their happy life as a nuclear family, the new story of a happy single-parent family has missing elements. Because her mother never mentions her own sexual needs, Marie-Anne finds it easy to edit out of the

story her mother's need for sex, for a male companion. But Helen obviously feels this need, and when she meets Lionel, the missing element in her new life is supplied. For Marie-Anne, by contrast, this is when "the world came to an end" (16).

Certainly this is where the story of the successfully coping single mother comes to an end. Lionel's presence disrupts the family and alienates Marie-Anne and Patty from their mother. Along with her dislike for Lionel, Marie-Anne finds it difficult to accept the changes in Helen. The relationship she had established with her mother was essential to her growing sense of herself and she cannot accept the fact that her mother wants to redefine that relationship. When Helen asks her daughters to call her by her first name, when she says, "Sometimes, I think that you're the mother and I'm the teenager, Marie-Anne!" (19), she is writing a new role for herself which, in her daughters' eyes, makes her no longer a "real mother."

Marie-Anne remembers watching her mother nurse Patty as a baby and finding the sight of her mother's "swollen, blue-white breast" not only "shocking" but also "beautiful" (12). Yet now, when she sees "the silvery stretch marks on her mother's belly" she is nauseated (19). Her mother's body is now repulsive to her because she knows her mother is sleeping with Lionel--a knowledge which she cannot ignore because she

hears the sounds of their lovemaking through the hot air vent in her room. Marie-Anne, who is still at an age where she cannot imagine her parents having sex, is unable to deal with her mother's sexuality. Marie Anne's inability to accept her mother as a sexual being suggests a natural conflict for Helen between her identity as mother and as lover.

The situation is apparently resolved when Marie-Anne arranges for herself and Patty to go live with their father and his new wife. Yet this is no resolution, since it leaves the mother distraught. Our last glimpse is of her running after the car shouting "Don't take my baby from me, don't take my baby from me, don't take...." (22). The unfinished sentence indicates the degree to which both stories--Marie-Anne's story of her family and Helen's story of her new life--are left incomplete and unsettled.

The ending only confirms the reader's awareness that the situation is not as simple and clear-cut as the stories the characters tell themselves. "Real Mothers" is not a story in which blame can be laid at the feet of a "villain" (though Lionel auditions admirably for the part). Coral Ann Howells suggests that "What this painful story of grief and loss shows is how difficult it is for a woman to displace the old 'real mother' concept as she tries to tell a different story about her own life within the family" (Howells 114). By "the old 'real mother' concept" Howells seems to refer to a

socially constructed definition of motherhood which insists that children and domestic duties should be the woman's central concerns. Helen's attempt to write her own story is acceptable to her children as long as they retain their central role in her life, but as soon as she begins putting her own sexual needs first, she ceases to be a "real mother."

Comparing "Real Mothers" with "Harry and Violet" and also with *Latakia* shows the importance of retold stories in Audrey Thomas' writing. As we saw in Chapter One, Thomas has sometimes been criticized for telling the same story over and over again. Anne Archer writes that "Thomas' work is...troublesome, because the recurrence of fixed motifs within one basic story induces claustrophobia....Is Thomas, in effect, a one-trick pony?" (Archer 215). Another critic, Joan Coldwell, disagrees. "When one looks closely at all of Thomas' novels, it becomes apparent that the episodes are not in fact repeated; each telling is in a different form and for a different artistic purpose" (Coldwell, "Memory Organized" 47). Audrey Thomas readily admits that she uses repetition: "All my novels are one novel, in a sense....Each one extends, in a different style, offering more information, what is basically the same story" (Graham 106).

Thomas herself obviously sees the variations as a useful technique. Her different treatment of a similar storyline, rather than indicating a limited scope, often reveals new

perspectives within the story. As we have seen, her retelling of the story of a miscarriage in Africa allows her to explore new aspects and different possible outcomes of the woman's experience. We will see in the next chapter that her repeated stories of mother-daughter relationships allow us to understand those relationships more fully by presenting them from different perspectives. As Thomas writes the self into being, she undermines the idea of a unified, central subject by exploring a multiplicity of speaking subjects. Her use of autobiography and repetition allows us to see all her heroines as different possible versions of the same woman, the same subject, whom we are led to identify as Thomas herself. Because her characters do not have discrete identities, we cannot simply say "Isobel cannot cope with the loss of her child and goes insane," because Isobel is also Sarah Gordon, who murders her baby, and Helen, who survives her divorce and gets on with her life, and Rachel of *Latakia*, who becomes a successful writer.

So, by retelling these stories, Thomas alerts us to the fluid, shifting subjectivity of her main characters, which allows them to create themselves through language. Their struggle with "roles" is really a struggle with the words which define their multiple, shifting selves, words such as "mother," "lover," and "writer." Thomas' retelling of the story allows us to view this struggle from a variety of

perspectives.

In "Real Mothers," we recognize the limitations of Marie-Anne's point of view, yet we tend to sympathize with her and, to some extent, accept her evaluations of Lionel as "a jerk" (18) and her mother as irresponsible. The short story "Harry and Violet" in the same volume deals with a similar situation, as do sections of the novel *Latakia*. In all three stories, a divorced mother finds a satisfying sexual relationship with a man who is insensitive towards her daughter(s). But "Harry and Violet" and *Latakia* are both told from the mother's point of view. Our immediate reaction may be that these women are more concerned, more sensitive to their daughters' needs, than is Marie-Anne's mother; the shift in point of view warns us that this may be just a difference in perception, and that if Marie-Anne's mother, Helen, were to tell her story it would be a story very different from "Real Mothers."

The woman in "Harry and Violet" is torn apart by her awareness of the dual roles she must play. She is aware that her lover feels "her ready to swing instantly from lover to mother at the sound of a distant cry" (*Real Mothers* 71). The conflict is not between equal forces: "If it ever came to a choice, there was none. Always, the child was first" (69). She chooses her responsibility to her child over her sexual needs, but the choice does not obliterate her need for sex and for romantic love. When she and her lover are having sex she

realizes that "she needed this too, and from this man who loved her....She felt all the empty and sore places fill up, expand, smooth out" (74).

The lover and the child, by their hostility towards each other and their inability to understand why the woman needs them both, are each attempting to construct a situation in which they will come first in the woman's life. She can be all mother or all lover, but she will have to choose. She wants to tell a story in which she can be both, and not be torn apart by their demands. The lover and the child attempt to set up a system of rigidly defined oppositions: "mother" versus "lover," while she wants to allow these self-definitions to be more fluid. When she looks back at her first meeting with her lover, in a café where "They were reading the same book, only different volumes," she feels "that he had been led into her world under false pretences" (70), for she appeared to be an unencumbered single woman, and the reality of her child does not present itself until the affair has already started. Throughout their relationship she is, in a sense, attempting to revise his initial reading of her, to make him recognize what the words "I have a child, a little girl" (70) signify in her life.

In this story, as in "Real Mothers," the mother's bed is the site of conflict. For the small child in both stories, the mother's bed is a secure place where she can seek shelter

when she is frightened, where she can start the day close to her mother. In "Real Mothers" it is also the place where mother and adolescent daughter confide in each other. For the lover in both stories, the bed is the place for sex, and children are not welcome there. The mother's bed, like the mother's body, has both a sexual and a maternal function, and it comes to represent the divided territory of the woman's life. The mothers in these stories struggle to take control of their own lives, to decide for themselves what roles they should play, while lovers and children try to make such decisions for them.

Pauline Butling, in her article "Thomas and Her Rag-Bag," discusses some of the other stories in *Real Mothers*, then turns to "Harry and Violet" with the phrase "On a more humorous note" (Butling 198). This is typical of critical approaches to "Harry and Violet" which is usually read as a funny story. Unlike "Real Mothers," it ends with an amusing anecdote rather than with a tragic disruption of family life. But the story is more than just the set-up to a punch line. Read along with "Real Mothers" we see it as another rendering, from a different point of view and in a different tone, of the same basic conflict. Both stories ask: What is a "real mother"? Can she also be a "real lover"? To what extent is she free to define the term "real mother" for herself?

Thomas' novel *Latakia*, published in 1979, raises some of

these same questions. The family situation it describes is very similar to that of "Real Mothers" and "Harry and Violet." The relationship between the protagonist, her lover, and her daughters occupies only a small section of the book, and those scenes add little to what we have seen in the short stories. But *Latakia* places those concerns about the mother-lover role into a larger context in which the mother is also a writer, struggling with the problems of language and its inadequacies while attempting to write her own story.

After the publication of *Blown Figures*, Thomas told an interviewer that her next novel would "be even madder....I would like to try, now, going further into madness" (Komisar 64). Examined in the light of that prediction, her next novel, *Latakia*, seems at first to be a complete departure from its predecessor. As protagonist the mad, dissociated Isobel is superseded by the coherent, rational, self-aware Rachel, apparently very much the unified subject-speaker. The problematic, shifting narrator of *Blown Figures* is succeeded by Rachel as first-person narrator, casting her story in the form of a letter to her ex-lover and producing a fairly straightforward epistolary novel. Though the story unfolds achronologically, once all the pieces have been put together they form a coherent narrative, clearly realist, not interrupted by any of the "found material" that is present in *Mrs. Blood* and which dominates *Blown Figures*. After *Blown*

Figures, *Latakia* appears to be a return to sanity, and to realism, rather than a descent into further madness.

As Ellen Quigley points out in "Redefining Unity and Dissolution in *Latakia*," *Latakia*, unlike *Blown Figures*, "does not disperse into a cloud of highly charged loose ends that somehow fit together at dissolution. Even the book's layout is more compact, simpler, and easier to follow" (Quigley 201). Barbara Godard suggests that *Latakia* seems "more like a prelude than a sequel to *Blown Figures*. The problem is where to go after the mind has been blown, the language disrupted" (Godard, rev. of *Latakia* 123).

But perhaps *Latakia* is madder than it seems. Most of the criticism of this novel centres on its fascination with language, with storytelling. Susan Rudy Dorscht, in her thesis, classifies it as "experimental" along with *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures* because in these novels "the writing is aware...about its own processes as writing" (Rudy Dorscht 4). Godard, though the review quoted above suggests that she finds it ultimately unsatisfying, speaks of it elsewhere as a novel which "explores the deceptions of language, the slippage which occurs when sensation is translated into speech, which is in turn betrayed by written language" (Godard, *Audrey Thomas* 254). Smaro Kamboureli emphasizes the same elements when she says that "*Latakia* is powerful exactly because it bears the marks of Thomas' engagement in the areas of love and writing.

It is a kind of orgasmic writing that reflects both the 'aesthetics of the flesh' and the erotics of writing" (Kamboureli 21).

Latakia is a book about the impossibility of writing a book, a description of an experience whose central theme is the inability of language to describe experience. Rachel suggests the beauty of the Greek landscape even as she laments her inability to capture it.

It is very hard, with tools as worn as words,
to capture the way the street looks in early
morning, mid-afternoon, beneath the moon....
I want a palette, not a pen. I have to say
that such and such is 'like' something else...
when what I really want to do is dip my brush
directly into the ocean, the sky, the sun, the
eye of Heleni's donkey, the dark beard of the
priest, and transfer it all to canvas. (*Latakia* 61)

Like the women in the short stories we have looked at, Rachel struggles to define herself rather than let others define her. The phrase "real mother" occurs at least twice in *Latakia*; as in the short story, it is connected to a woman's attempt to create her own identity. Rachel reflects that, at the beginning of her relationship with Michael, she was not only "a published writer" but also "a real mother, in some senses, with real children" (74). And she remembers the discord that entered her household along with Michael: his reluctance to help out in domestic chores also caused the children to feel that Rachel, by insisting that they all share the burden of housework, "was somehow violating [her] 'real'

role as a mother" (86).

Rachel's lover, Michael, is similar to Lionel in "Real Mothers" in terms of his relationship with her children, who openly dislike him. Rachel reminds Michael that "Sometimes you called [the youngest child] 'you little fucking bitch' and of course, I defended her. What did you expect?" (51). Between the demands of Michael, her children, and her work, Rachel feels "as though [she] were being torn apart" by the need to be "mother, writer, teacher, lover" (24).

Like the woman in "Harry and Violet," Rachel's conflict is not simply between the roles of mother and lover. She needs privacy, a space in which she can define herself. The woman in "Harry and Violet" tells her lover "I wish we had space for separate bedrooms....I've got used to my own private space, that's all" (*Real Mothers* 66). Rachel "sometimes... just wanted to shut the door of [her] room and crawl into bed alone" (*Latakia* 24). The woman's bed, once again, is the site of the conflict. Can the bed be a place for her, alone, as well as a place to have sex with a lover or nurture a child? Can her body belong primarily to the woman herself rather than to all those who make claims upon it?

Rachel's expression of this need supports Ellen Quigley's argument that *Latakia* is a romance which inverts the traditional structure of romance. It seems to move from unity to dissolution, since the relationship between Michael and

Rachel fails by the end of the novel. But Quigley argues that the novel does, in fact, end in unity because "Rachel's ultimate romance is with her self, her female-defined identity, and not with Michael nor with the patriarchal world he represents" (Quigley 202). Rachel, like all Thomas' heroines, seeks to rewrite a traditional narrative structure--that of the romance--in order to write her own experiences into it. Like Mrs. Blood rewriting the language of liturgy, Rachel is subverting patriarchal language to write herself into it.

Both Michael and "Harry" in the short story respond to their lovers' need for private space petulantly, saying "I can move out" (*Latakia* 24, *Real Mothers* 66). These men are either unable or unwilling to understand what the words "my own private space" signify in a woman's language. In *Latakia*, this inability to speak one another's language, which goes beyond a gender communication gap to imply the inadequacy of language in general, becomes a central concern.

One of the reasons the word "mother" is so heavy with implications in Rachel's relationship with Michael is that she believes Michael wants to be "mothered" by a woman, and that his wife, Hester, actually performs this function for him. "'You aren't a good wife to me'," Michael complains. When Rachel asks, "'Well, what's your definition of a good wife then?'" he replies, "'A wife is someone who is always there

when you need her.' 'No,'" Rachel replies, "'that's the mother of a child under five'" (39). But Hester is willing to be "the wife as mother" (73); she claims to love Michael in the same way that Rachel loves her children (43) and makes no distinction between the love a woman has for an adult male and the love she has for a small child (109). Rachel, reflecting on "the visceral tie" which connects her to her daughters, wonders "Is that what Hester with all her suppressed maternal instinct feels for you?" (113).

Michael's definition of "a good wife," which is supported by Hester's willingness to play that role, is unacceptable to Rachel. Since she is unwilling to fulfil this traditional role, she has to create a role for herself. She recognizes that, to her Greek neighbours, the fact that she is a mother gives her an identity; to Michael, Rachel is "defined" in a way that Hester is not because she is a published writer (18). Yet, she tells Michael in her imaginary monologue, "The fact that I defined myself in other ways at first irritated and then overwhelmed you" (39). "A 'wife' was not supposed to have such definition" (85). Rachel's attempts to define herself clash with Michael's attempts to define her. She rejects the dictum that "Women are supposed to define themselves through the men they love" (40). She is too good a writer in her own right to be "wife of the rising young novelist" (40); she is too much a mother to her daughters to

re-direct her maternal instincts towards Michael. Unlike D.H. Lawrence's wife, whom Michael points to as an example of wifely devotion, Rachel cannot prove her love for a man by leaving her children behind (53).

Yet, Rachel cannot simply walk away from Michael and his manipulative love, because he gives her something which is essential to her self-definition, something previously lacking. He sees her as a sexually attractive woman. As Rachel points out, "When you are thirty-eight and have three kids and your waistline has disappeared...and some handsome young man comes along and falls in love with you that way...what mortal woman could resist?" (62). Throughout her story, Rachel insists that "physically," she and Michael are "absolutely perfect mates" (20). She writes, "When you touched me, my flesh smoked" (24), a phrase used by Isobel in *Blown Figures* to describe sex with Richard. Yet Rachel also recognizes the power Michael has over her because of this sexual chemistry. "For the first time in my life, I really understood the politics of male chauvinism, the...use of power bestowed by the genitals and the System" (24). In Michael's eyes, his sexual power over Rachel gives him the right to define her, but she resists his attempts, and the relationship becomes a battlefield.

The battles occur because Rachel is attempting to define herself in a way that will allow her to be Michael's sexual

partner, as well as being a writer, a mother, an autonomous individual. She and Michael travel as husband and wife, yet she is not a "wife" in his sense of the word. The problem is complicated by the fact that Michael already has a wife, Hester, and the relationship is briefly expanded into a *ménage à trois* which includes Hester. When an acquaintance asks Hester and Rachel "Which one of you is his girlfriend?...I can't quite make it out," the question highlights the inadequacy of language to define roles in this relationship. As does Rachel's reply: "Hester's his wife....I suppose I'm his girlfriend, although sometimes it seems like the other way around" (158).

The *ménage à trois*, and Rachel's relationship with Michael, ultimately fails because of this inability to define roles. Rachel cannot be the wife Michael wants, nor can she be the person she herself wants to be as long as she is with him. She writes that "You--or our relationship, got in my way....kept me from seeing anything....I can't afford that kind of involvement" (21).

A concern for definitions, for people's inability to communicate with one another, permeates *Latakia*. As in "The More Little Mummy in the World," the characters occupy a foreign country, struggling with the language. In their relationship, also, Rachel and Michael inhabit foreign ground, each trying to make the other understand them. They become

aware of the inadequacy of language, of the layers of meaning signified by their words. As Rachel comes to know Michael better, she feels able to interpret his statements. "'Hester wouldn't stand for it' translates as 'I don't want to rock the boat, to have to make a choice.' I've finally learned your language" (19).

Rachel discovers that not only Michael's language but also her own is suspect. Most problematic of all is the word "love," whose many meanings complicate the relationship. She remembers the first time they made love: "I suddenly reached up my arms and whispered, 'Michael, I love you.' It was a lie when I said it and yet as soon as I said it, it was true" (45). The meaning of the word "love" is determined by context: a relationship has been constructed by language. When Rachel consults her friend Robert about whether she should go to Greece with Michael, she offers the phrase "I love him," as her reason for wanting to go. Robert replies, "That's a woman's word, I don't know what you mean. You tell me he's nasty and mean and selfish and you feel you're being used and yet you 'love' him" (98).

Robert's comment implies not only that a woman's definition of love involves suffering, but that the difficulty of communication is based solely on gender differences. But *Latakia* as a whole suggests that the problem goes much deeper. Rachel and Hester, though both women, discover that they

attach different meanings to the word "love." The problem of language is explored most thoroughly in the scenes in which Rachel and Michael visit the Syrian port of Latakia, an episode which concludes the book and forms the climax, though chronologically it precedes most of the events in the narrative. In this strange city, where not only the language but also the alphabet is unfamiliar, Rachel is struck by "How much we depended on language, on verbal interchange, for our security" (169). This leads her to complain:

The whole question of language, of communication, it's impossible. Why didn't we just stick to gestures and grunts....We invent alphabets and language systems in order to make things *clear*. But it doesn't really help. Once you get beyond letters, into words, into emotions and ideas, it doesn't help at all....And people who speak the same language don't even speak the same language....just make the same *sounds*. (171)

Though Rachel and Michael have been making the same sounds, they have never spoken each other's language--except perhaps, Rachel's story suggests, in sex, when they abandon words and speak with their bodies. Yet, as Michael points out, people continue to try to communicate through language, and Rachel, as a writer, continues to use words although she finds them unwieldy and unsatisfactory tools. *Latakia* is a celebration of language as well as a struggle with it. Audrey Thomas evokes Rachel, Michael, their relationship, and Greece, through words, yet the whole novel is grounded in a sense of the unreliability of words, which are so impossible but so

necessary.

So we are left with the paradox of Rachel, who has expressed her lack of faith in words, writing a 172-page love letter to Michael, whom she both loves and hates. This is clearly not a final attempt to establish the communication that was missing in their relationship, for Rachel claims that Michael will never read the letter. Like the pile of love letters in the post office addressed to Karl Reicker, who never comes to claim them, most of our attempts to communicate with each other never reach their intended audience (98). Rachel is aware of this, yet she writes because she is not concerned primarily with communicating with Michael, but with writing herself into story.

Rachel fully expects that Michael will use her for material just as she is using him: she imagines them meeting at a cocktail party a few years later, where only a select few realize that "you are the black-bearded villain of my most recent novel and I am the red-headed villainess of yours" (147). Each of them has planned the opening lines of an imaginary novel about their relationship. Rachel tells Michael, "If I were to write a novel about you, Michael, perhaps I would begin it thus..." (122). Michael says, "If I were to write a novel about this I would begin with the sentence, 'This is a tragedy about a man who loved two women'" (65). What Rachel fears is not how she might appear in a

novel Michael might write, but rather that she might disappear from the "story" of Michael's life. She wonders, if Michael is someday interviewed on a talk show: "Will you mention immediately that you are happily married and have been so for many years? Will I, will 'us,' be erased from your official biography? It would be easy to do (providing *I* keep quiet)" (146).

But Rachel does not keep quiet. Refusing to be silenced, she writes her own version of the story. She writes herself into existence rather than allowing Michael to write her out. In doing so, she achieves the goal set forth in the book's last line: "And remember, the best revenge is writing well" (172). *Latakia* is a woman writer writing about a woman writer writing about writing, as well as about love and jealousy, and in the end it affirms the need to go on writing at the same time as it points out the inadequacies of "tools as worn as words" (61).

* * *

If writing well is really the best revenge, then Rachel has had her revenge by turning Michael into a character in *her* story. We may go a step farther and assume, as Constance Rooke does in her review of *Latakia*, that if the story is as autobiographical as many readers believe, Audrey Thomas has had her revenge too: "The original of Michael will...read the book now that it is in print" (107). As Rooke points out, the

book's last line is "a play on the claim that the best revenge is *living well*" (107).³ Rachel speaks of "writing well" rather than "living well" because, as a woman writer, she is attempting to rewrite her own life's story, and she must write it well in order to live it well.

The final story in *Real Mothers also* illustrates the connection--and the gap--between writing and living. Pauline Butling points out that in the story "Crossing the Rubicon," "Before [the narrator] can act differently, she realizes she must first *imagine* herself acting differently. Thus the narrator is writing a story within a story in which she pictures herself transformed" (Butling, "Thomas and her Rag-Bag" 108). "Crossing the Rubicon" shows a woman struggling against the inherited stories of women's dependence on men, stories which imprison not only her but her daughter as well. In contrast to these, she is trying to write a story in which a woman breaks free of her dependence on a man and asserts her independence.

Like the other stories we have looked at in this chapter, "Crossing the Rubicon" can be read as another version of the same story, the same relationship, that forms the basis of *Latakia*. "Crossing the Rubicon" could be Rachel's story a few years after *Latakia* ends. The narrator, a writer who lives alone with her youngest daughter, is writing a story, perhaps autobiographical, about the aftermath of a love affair between

her character and a married man. The man's wife is also mentioned: the three of them briefly attempted a *ménage à trois*, and have apparently remained friends. Though the main character and her ex-lover are nameless and the wife is named Sheila, not Hester, the links to *Latakia* are clear. Rachel's prediction that she would be eliminated from Michael's official biography has come true in "Crossing the Rubicon." The woman in the story hears her ex-lover and his wife telling an acquaintance what they have been doing for the past few years. "No mention was made of the long break-up or his time with her or their reconciliation....It was as though her time with him hadn't meant anything, as though in their official history she was not going to be mentioned, not even as a footnote" (*Real Mothers* 163). Even Rachel's mocking suggestion that Michael and Hester will get a dog after their reconciliation is echoed here when the ex-lover informs the protagonist that he and his wife have a puppy.

What makes "Crossing the Rubicon" at once so interesting and problematic is that it is not simply the story of this woman meeting her ex-lover in Montreal. Rather, it is the story of a writer trying to write that story, struggling with it, deciding how she will manipulate the characters. In the statement quoted above, Butling assumes that the story the woman writes is clearly autobiographical: she assumes a direct, transparent relationship between the writer/narrator

and her character. But, as Coral Ann Howells points out,

There is...a third story which we are not told: why telling this story about the woman in Montreal is important to the narrator and also something she does not particularly want to do. We might be tempted to see the 'I' narrator...and the 'she' of the Montreal story as doubles, but the absence of the third story problematises the relationship between them."

(Howells, "No Sense of an Ending," 120)

The writer-narrator identifies closely with her character: when she thinks of the ex-lover "reeling her in," she says, "My mouth hurts, just thinking about it. I cannot give her such a painful metaphor" (*Real Mothers* 161). In many passages it is not clear whether the story of the woman in Montreal is being imagined or remembered. The relationship between writer and character is close but, as Howells reminds us, is never clearly established.

Behind all this, of course, stands the shadowy figure of the "real" author, Audrey Thomas. Just as we are tempted to assume that the narrator of "Crossing the Rubicon" is writing about herself, we may also assume that, here and in other stories, Thomas is writing about herself. The structure of "Crossing the Rubicon" foregrounds this autobiographical element, and, by refusing to clarify the link between the narrator and her character, Thomas seems to be challenging us to remember that the link between writing and life is never straightforward or transparent. Once again, our view of the unified speaking subject is challenged.

What is important in this story is not whether the meeting in Montreal "really" happened to the narrator, or "really" happened to Audrey Thomas, or "really" ended that way. What is important to our understanding of Thomas' exploration of language and women's experience is that in "Crossing the Rubicon" Audrey Thomas has written about a woman who is able to create her own story, a story in which the woman is active, not passive, in which she walks away rather than being left behind.

"Crossing the Rubicon" also dramatizes the gap between writing and living in the contrast between the story of the woman in Montreal and the story of the writer-narrator's own life. It is true that at the end of the story she has her character walk away from her ex-lover after forcing him to admit that he misses her. As the writer, she is in control here: she has the power to make the ex-lover say "I miss you," and to make the woman walk away, waving goodbye without looking back. But the story's closing lines remind us that this ending is constructed: "And she doesn't look back. In my story, that is. She doesn't look back in my story" (168). This ending both underlines the writer's success in writing a new story for women and emphasizes the tenuous link between that story and women's "real lives."

This narrator, like the others we have met in this chapter, is a mother. In "Crossing the Rubicon," however, no

apparent conflict exists between the mother's sexuality and her ability to be a "real mother" to her daughter. The conflict in this story centres on the fact that while the mother struggles to write a new story about male-female relationships, her twelve-year-old daughter is still caught up in an old story, baking Valentine's Day cupcakes to impress boys who are "not even nice" (163).

The mother realizes that despite a generation of women trying to tell different stories about their relationships with men, the daughter and her friends are still playing the same games she herself did as a child. They are still trying to win the boys' attention and approval, still privileging their relationships with boys over their friendships with girls, still attracted to insensitive boys and unable to explain why. The narrator is puzzled by a society in which gender roles and social attitudes seem to have shifted radically, yet where so much remains the same. Her mother's long-ago admonition to pour her drink into a potted palm rather than let a man get her drunk now seems ridiculous in a society where an apparently respectable girl can wear a T-shirt that says, "Happiness is a tight pussy" (158-9). Yet her daughter still bakes cupcakes for the boys and decorates them with candy hearts bearing the exact same mottoes as the candy hearts of the 1940s. Everything has changed, yet nothing has changed.

In a humorous aside, the narrator wonders where these candy hearts are made.

In some small town by-passed by the Trans-Canada,
in some equally obscure factory where the women
still wear snoods and current jargon never filters
in?...Do the workers in the candy factory still
jitterbug in the staff canteen and listen to a
skinny Frankie singing, "That Old Black Magic's
Got Me in Its Spell"? (157-8)

The daughter's attitude, and the dependence of the woman in Montreal on her ex-lover, seem to indicate that, as far as their relationships with men are concerned, women are living in that obscure candy factory, by-passed by the changes in traditional family structure and morality. The children in the schoolyard do not recognize the discontinuity between their skipping rhyme--"First comes love/Then comes marriage/Then comes baby in the/Bay-by carriage" (160)--and the single-parent families in which many of them live. The language of a long-dead social order still dominates the thinking of girls and women. Writing a story that deconstructs the traditional power structure is a positive step--if the story ever gets written--but as we look at the narrator's daughter and her world we share the narrator's concern. Will women ever be able to rewrite their dependence on men who are "not even nice"? Will they ever be able to walk away without looking back? "Crossing the Rubicon" encourages us to ask if this mother's writing can change the story that her daughter will inherit.

The mother and daughter in "Crossing the Rubicon" point forward to *Intertidal Life*, Thomas' critically acclaimed 1984 novel. This novel, Thomas' next book after *Real Mothers*, received "almost universally favourable reviews," according to Barbara Godard, although "The incorporation of feminist analysis into the novel is something which critics almost universally believe to be poorly handled" (Godard, *Audrey Thomas* 16, 17). Godard believes that this criticism demonstrates that

despite the acclaim for *Intertidal Life*, critical norms have not changed in the Canadian literary establishment. Value is still determined by the standard of a transparent, unmediated language which purports to connect word and thing...in the analytico-referential discourse of modernism, the one which is disrupted in Thomas' novels with their overt thematizing of the construction of a subject-position and the text as productivity" (18).

Although *Intertidal Life* appears on the surface to be a more realist narrative than *Blown Figures* or *Mrs. Blood*, and is classified by Susan Rudy Dorscht as one of the novels in which Thomas' writing "attempts to be transparent" (Rudy Dorscht 4), Godard clearly believes that *Intertidal Life* is another book in which Thomas disrupts and questions traditional narrative. My reading of the text is based on the same assumption, because of *Intertidal Life's* preoccupation with language and its relationship to experience. "Although the effort to redefine female identity, in part through a critical approach to language, ignites all Thomas' work, she

gathers and centres it most powerfully in *Intertidal Life*" (Hales 77). One important aspect of this novel--its exploration of mother-daughter relationships--will be discussed in Chapter Three. In this chapter I would like to look specifically at the use of language in *Intertidal Life*.

The front cover of *Intertidal Life* bears a quotation from Alice Munro: "This is what women are like...beyond all the fashionable definitions."⁴ This recommendation raises not only high expectations but difficult questions about the text beyond that cover. Susan Rudy Dorscht, in an article on Thomas, challenges Munro's statement, which "assumes there is a transparent relation between language and female experience" ("On Blowing Figures..." 62). Munro seems to assume a unified and unifying subject/speaker, who can somehow capture in language the "reality" not only of her life, but the lives of all women.⁵ In fact, this novel, though it is a much more realist narrative than some of Audrey Thomas' earlier works, carries on Thomas' project of problematizing the relationship between language and experience. The images of exploration which recur throughout the book indicate not only an exploration of women's experience, but also an exploration of language and its ability to express that experience.

Intertidal Life's protagonist is Alice Hoyle--writer, divorcée, and mother of three--another character whose biographical similarity to Audrey Thomas is obvious. Audrey

and Ian Thomas, like Alice and Peter Hoyle, moved with their three daughters to a small island off the coast of British Columbia in 1972 and were separated shortly afterwards, finally divorcing in 1979. John Moss calls *Intertidal Life* "an unnerving document--fictional in form but so close to life that the reader feels implicated in an unconscionable violation of privacy" (Moss, *Readers' Guide* 354). The novel is an exploration of memory--specifically, of Alice's memory of the year her husband left her, an event that occurred eight years before the novel's opening chapters. As she remembers, Alice creates her story, imposing order on her memories as she creates a narrative version of her own past. As narrator, she is aware of this process. When her relationship with her two closest women friends, Stella and Trudl, falls apart, she tells herself, "I have to remember...all the good times we had" (*Intertidal Life* 242). When she and her daughter Flora explore the physical objects of memory while cleaning out their cabin, she tells Flora, who is too young to remember the events Alice is reliving, that all we can know about our ancestral past "is what our parents and relatives choose to tell us" (277). And, she might well add, all we know about our own past is what we choose to tell ourselves. Alice sees the remembered past of her marriage as a story and tells herself that that "story was over" (225). Alice's journal, in which she says "I need to sprawl, to scrawl, to pull out from

myself the great glistening sentences full of hate and fury and fling them, still wet and steaming onto these white pages" (30), is similar to Rachel's letter to Michael in that it is an exploration of experience and of memory that allows her to write herself into story.

The exploration of language is a key part of Alice's quest, perhaps even more central in this novel than in *Latakia*. "Alice's quest involves not only a discriminating about her past...but also about the very language in which the past was formulated and shaped" (Hales 79). Alice's interest in word meanings and origins is so well established that it has become a family joke, and her constant plays on words and musing on definitions are intimately connected to her thoughts about herself, her family, and her broken marriage. In this novel, Alice and Audrey Thomas go beyond exploring words and their meanings to explore silence, the world of saying "Nothing," the language of the deaf.

In its exploration of language, *Intertidal Life* relentlessly examines the significance of the things people say--and do not say. One of the key exchanges occurs when Alice's husband Peter, shortly before leaving Alice, asks her, "What do you really want?" Alice, contented, says "Nothing" (*Intertidal Life* 30). Throughout the novel she constantly re-examines that response, knowing it was the wrong one, but not sure what answer would have been right. It reminds her of

Cordelia's reply to Lear, and Lear's answer, "Nothing will come of nothing" (35). She thinks also of the meaning of "love" in scoring tennis--"love" means "nothing"--and concludes that when Peter asked what she wanted and she answered "nothing," "What I meant was 'love'" (166). This suggests, perhaps, that she wants no *thing* from Peter--only his love.

At other times Alice speaks when she knows she should "say nothing": she asks Peter "Do you love me?", knowing "it was another one of those questions you weren't supposed to ask" (34). When she and Peter make love, she is careful not to say "I love you," or "Please, I want you back": she lies there "Saying over and over in her head, like a rosary, all the things she must not say" (83). The clichés Peter uses to absolve himself are acts of violence against her: she tells him she would rather not go for a walk with him because "Bad things happen to me on walks. People shoot me down with words: I NEVER LOVED YOU BUT I'LL ALWAYS CARE FOR YOU. It's the hunting season" (63).

Words may be dangerous, especially for women, but they are also necessary for Alice, who is a writer and a collector of words. Her reflections on word meanings throughout the book are always tied in with the emotions and events she is reliving. When Peter, her estranged husband, asks her if they can "get things settled," she feels "for the first time...the

full power of this word 'estrangle' " (31). When she thinks of the shame Peter used to feel over the body and sex, she remembers that the root of the word "pudendum" means "to be ashamed" (80). She writes the word "LOVER" and then draws a line through the L (137). And, like other Thomas heroines we have met in this chapter, she explores the role words have played in defining her identity as a woman and mother: "Who can see the 'other' in mother?" She makes a sinister link between the two meanings of "mummy"--"All wrapped up in her family" (136).

Alice finds a phrase in a book which says, "If you are sane you know that the word 'cat' cannot scratch you" (191). But to accept that definition at face value is to deny that words have a power of their own, and it is this power of words and names that fascinates Alice. She associates her own name with that of Alice in Wonderland, an identification which, along with the stories she reads about Spanish explorers, adds to her picture of herself as an explorer in a strange world--the world of the single mother, of the woman without a man. Her estranged husband is variously identified as Peter the Rock, Peter Pumpkin Eater (who "had a wife and couldn't keep her"), and Peter Pan, refusing to grow up (60, 70, 134). She mocks the pretentious hippie habit of changing names, yet wants a new name for herself now that she has lost her identity as "Mrs. Hoyle."

Continuing to follow her images of exploration, she sees that women have been colonized by men. "Women have let men define them, taken their *names* even, with marriage, just like a conquered or newly settled region, *British Columbia, British Guiana, New Orleans, New Jersey, New France, New England, etcetera*. I really understand all those African nations taking new names with their independence" (171). "As she reaches into her past, Alice begins to see how instrumental unexamined, 'unheard' words have been in defining her" (Hales 78). She explores the hidden power of words such as "mother," "wife" and "love." Though Alice does not literally change her name, she recognizes the importance of naming and self-definition as she learns to define herself not as "Peter's wife" but as Alice, herself.

One way in which Alice insists on her own identity is in changing "Alice Hoyle, housewife," to "Alice Hoyle, writer," on the separation agreement--though she also considers "castaway," "reject," and "lunatic, part-time" as possible occupations (*Intertidal Life* 157). Her need to protect her identity as a writer often comes into conflict with her other feminine roles, as mother, wife, and friend. Alice explores the conflicts and difficulties of her role, deciding that, if the woman's role as such is difficult, "The woman artist has an even harder time" (173).

Alice's identity as a writer is central to her

exploration of women and language, for she is a woman who questions language, feels threatened by it and suspicious of it, yet is compelled to use it. As we saw in the last chapter, when her first child is born, Alice writes a letter to her newborn daughter because she is driven by the need "to talk, to tell someone" (251). She later destroys that letter for fear Peter or his mother might read it; her need to communicate conflicts with her need to remain silent.

Like many women writers, both Alice and her creator seem to recognize that traditional, phallogentric language excludes them, yet they are forced to use it. Alice, as a writer, recognizes that "women's speech (and, by extension, writing) exists in a 'muted' relationship to men's speech, as well as to the dominant male-stream discourse that shapes and supports our patriarchal social system" (Nemeth 2). From Alice's earliest reflections on the power of the word "nothing," the novel plays with the possibilities of *not* speaking, with the power of what is not said. Alice explores spoken language, but she also explores silence. Sometimes silence is forced upon her: Peter puts his hand over her mouth to keep her from asking a question he does not want to answer (*Intertidal Life* 83). She is at first impressed by the fact that her hippie friends Raven and Selene never raise their voices; later she sees the rage that their quietness hides. Selene, in fact, loses her voice after a confrontation with her mother, and

suffers silently from asthma when she receives her mother's letters. Alice, looking at Selene, wonders, "What was she trying so hard not to say?" (180).

Although silence can point to what is being suppressed, repressed, oppressed, Alice finds that silence can also be a creative choice. At several points in the book she chooses to remain silent rather than speak to Peter. The exploration of silence as an alternative form of communication comes about through Alice's acquaintance with Stella's deaf lover, Harold. Harold's deafness is seldom seen as a handicap, though occasionally Alice notices that he is distressed by his inability to understand the people around him. In general, Harold is a positive, life-affirming character, who repeatedly insists that hearing people are the handicapped ones. Because of Harold, Alice and the other women practice lip-reading and sign language. Like Stella, whose main discovery from living with Harold is that "the deaf are noisy" (59), Alice learns that what appears to be a world of silence is in fact full of creative possibilities for communication. When Alice's eldest daughter, Hannah, communicates with Selene in sign during a visit to Peter, Hannah reports back to Alice that "Dad got very annoyed because he couldn't understand what we were saying" (98). Like spoken or written language, sign language creates a community between those who use it and excludes those who cannot.

"Any writing by women is subversive, because through writing women refuse silence" (Nemeth 3). Alice's writing and speech are subversive as she rejects the silence Peter has imposed on her and discovers a voice as "noisy" as that of Harold and his deaf friends. We see Alice reading Spanish explorers, not French feminists, but in her conversations with her women friends, in her sprawling, scrawling journals, she responds to the challenge thrown out by Hélène Cixous: "It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, a place other than silence" (Cixous 251). The world of the deaf is not the silent place hearing people assume it to be, but a world full of communication; the almost man-less world of Alice's island is likewise full of women confirming each other in a place other than silence.

Alice sometimes sees herself, a woman without a man, as handicapped. Thinking of War Amps, she wonders, "Were there love amps too, people who wandered around with parts of themselves, let's take the heart, for example, permanently missing?" (*Intertidal Life* 242). Through her explorations she discovers that the "handicap" of being a woman alone can, like Harold's deafness, be the means to discovering a new language. Just as hearing people are afraid of silence, so women fear

the world without men, fear what they may discover about themselves, about other women, about the language they have been speaking, when they are "set free" from the men whose names have defined them.

Alice, often reluctantly, sometimes eagerly, plunges into this new world and explores it. The language of the deaf becomes her image for her own new language, for the language of women. When Alice leaves the children with Peter for a year, he tells her what she already knows--that he is seeing Stella. "'I'm sorry,' Alice said, in her imitation of Harold's voice.... 'I can't hear you, I'm deaf.' She signed good-bye to him and walked away" (240).

When Alice, the writer, the speaker, the explorer of language, speaks for the last time in this book, she chooses to speak in sign language. She is being anesthetized for surgery and, "in a last burst of naughtiness," follows the doctor's instruction to count backwards from ten by signing "10, 9, 8..." (281).

The women's conversations in *Intertidal Life* seem to imply the cliché about sexual relationships: you can't live with 'em and you can't live without 'em. Women's relationships with men are seen as both inadequate and necessary. The same paradox is suggested about women's relationship to language. Alice is not content to accept the male-centered language which has defined her, but she cannot

reject communication either. Rather, she struggles with language, explores it, makes it her own. Like Harold, she is not so much handicapped as speaking a different language. We are warned not to assume that because women's reality is not articulated in male-dominated language, women are therefore silent. Like the deaf, Alice and the other women in this novel are noisily discovering their own, different voices.

Discovering their own voices, writing themselves into story, the mothers and writers in Audrey Thomas' short stories and novels are exploring and reclaiming language. The beneficiaries of this exploration are not only the women themselves, but the next generation of women, their daughters, to whom they hope to pass on a different world from the male-centered one with which they struggle. As well as examining how motherhood affects their definition of themselves, Thomas' heroines reflect on the heritage they have received from their mothers and the legacies they will leave their daughters. The next chapter will discuss Thomas' portrayal of mother-daughter relationships.

NOTES ON CHAPTER TWO

¹ Audrey Thomas seems to dislike the term "postmodern." After using the word "process" in an interview, she added, "I hate to sound like those goddamn post-modernists" (Wachtel, "Interview" 55).

² The two theoretical approaches described by Rudy Dorscht are familiar to most readers of feminist literary theory. The Anglo-American school is represented by such critics as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose *Madwoman in the Attic* and *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* attempt to establish a "canon" of women writers. Another prominent voice in this school is Elaine Showalter, who uses the term "gynocritics" to describe this brand of feminist criticism (Benstock 37). French feminist theory (labelled "gynesis" by Showalter) is represented by such women as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, poststructuralist critics who were influenced by the theories of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida.

³ The quotation "Living well is the best revenge" comes originally from George Herbert's *Outlandish Proverbs*, 1640. [H.L. Mencken, ed. *A New Dictionary of Quotations*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966: 1031.]

⁴ This note appears on the hardcover edition of *Intertidal Life*, Toronto: Stoddart, 1984. [Published simultaneously in New York by Beaufort Books.]

⁵ While it seems hardly likely that Alice Munro is unaware of poststructuralist theory, her writing does not seem to share the concerns of that theory as much as does Audrey Thomas'. Munro's characters are deeply involved in the complexity of human relationships and morality, but Munro does not seem as overtly concerned as Thomas is with the degree to which those characters' selves are constructs. It may be of interest to note that Munro and Thomas are good friends and that Alice Munro appears as the narrator's fellow-writer "Lydia" in two of Thomas' short stories: "Initram" and "Mothering Sunday" (Godard, *Audrey Thomas* 252; Twigg 252).

CHAPTER THREE

WOUNDS AS WELL AS BLESSINGS:

MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN AUDREY THOMAS' FICTIONS

"The mother daughter combination is rare in legend and literature," laments Elizabeth Fisher in a 1971 article entitled "Mothers and Daughters" (Fisher 3). While this may once have been true, the literary gap Fisher and others have observed is beginning to be filled in modern Canadian literature, where explorations of the mother-daughter relationship are far from uncommon. Such works as Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*, and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* broke new ground in this area in the 1960s and 70s. Today, books centered on mothers and daughters are common in Canadian literature. Both Munro and Atwood have continued to explore this relationship in their later works, as have newer writers such as Aritha van Herk and Daphne Marlatt. Mary Jean Green observes that "In many cultures...the evocation of women's experience condemns a writer to marginalization. This does not seem to be the case in Canada, where the portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship, in particular..., has seemed to strike a responsive chord in the Canadian cultural context" (Green 42).

We have already seen many references to mother-daughter relationships in Audrey Thomas' work. From the understated but troubling references to the protagonist's mother in "If

One Green Bottle..." and *Mrs. Blood*, to the competent single mothers of *Real Mothers*, *Latakia*, and *Intertidal Life*, a fascination with this relationship permeates her novels and short stories. It is always closely allied to Thomas' concern with the relationship between language and reality. As the story "Crossing the Rubicon" suggests, these two themes come together in the question of how women's reality is shaped by the language of their mothers, the inherited stories about women's relationships to the world, to men, and to one another that women pass on to their daughters.

Thomas' most thorough exploration of the mother-daughter relationship occurs in her 1973 novel *Songs My Mother Taught Me*; in later novels and short stories she examines the implications and possible results of the relationship initially described in *Songs*. This chapter will look at that relationship, first by examining *Songs* in some detail, then by more briefly surveying Thomas' later works to see how the daughter of that novel responds to her mother and to her own daughters when she is an adult. In the later short stories, and the novel *Intertidal Life*, Thomas retells the story of the Isobel Cleary who appears in *Songs*, suggesting a more positive future than that of *Blown Figures*. In this version, the heroine survives what is damaging and learns from what is constructive in her own upbringing to become a stronger mother and daughter.

Before turning to an examination of Thomas' writing on the subject, let us briefly return to Elizabeth Fisher's comment about the absence of mothers and daughters in literature and legend. Fisher, like many other writers who have studied mother-daughter relationships, mentions the one major myth that does concern mothers and daughters: the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. In this story, which is used as a central archetype in Phyllis Chesler's 1972 study *Women and Madness*, the Earth-Goddess Demeter rescues her daughter Persephone from the male god--usually Hades/Pluto, god of the underworld--who has abducted, raped, and married her.

The mother-daughter relationship as seen in the myth of Demeter and Persephone has both positive and negative aspects. As Chesler points out, the myth portrays a "fierce bond of love, continuity and pride" between mother and daughter which is lacking in Judeo-Christian mythology (Chesler 17). The most important mother in Christian myth is, of course, the Virgin Mary. Marina Warner, in her book on the myth of the Virgin Mary, comments that in Sicily, images of the goddess Demeter "dandling her infant daughter Kore-Persephone in her arms [were] so close to the Madonna and Child that at Enna...the cathedral used to display a Greek statue of Demeter and her daughter on the altar" (Warner 276). In Christian culture Mary, a mother defined by her relationship to her son, displaces such female deities as Demeter. As we saw in

Chapter One, Mary's subservient position to God the Father makes her a troubling symbol of womanhood. "Mary is wife, mother, and child to the same male power-figure. She is utterly meek, abject, passive. In her, the ancient power of the Goddess is captured, chained..., domesticated and tranquilized" (Sjoo and Mor 354). Her submissive relationship to her divine son does not affirm female experience as does the mother-daughter bond exemplified by Demeter and Persephone.

On the other hand, Phyllis Chesler also points out that Demeter's rescue "condemns [Persephone] to a universally female fate: an identity no different from her mother's" (Chesler 29). Chesler contrasts Persephone with three other heroines of Greek legend: Psyche, Athena, and Artemis. Of the four, only Persephone, who retains her intimate relationship with her mother, fails to develop an independent identity.

This paradox must be dealt with in any exploration of the mother-daughter relationships: how does the daughter establish an identity separate from her mother's, while still inheriting from her mother those positive stories, that "legacy of power and humanity from adults of their own sex" that Chesler claims women are "starved" for (Chesler 18)? This question is important in examining literary models of the mother-daughter relationship. "The irony of the 'anti-Mom' novel rests on the negative consequences of choosing either to reject or to

accept the mother" (Gottleib and Keitner, "Mothers and Daughters" 24).

In the three novels by Munro, Laurence and Atwood mentioned above, each daughter establishes her independence: by assuming the maternal role towards an aging mother, as Rachel Cameron does in *A Jest of God*; by leaving home to face the world on her own terms rather than her mother's, as Del Jordan does in *Lives of Girls and Women*; or by overtly rejecting the mother's values and any relationship with her, as does Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*. Each of these daughters also learns acceptance of and sympathy towards her mother. In Doris Gros-Louis' examination of four Canadian novels, including *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, she finds "mothers whose limited, dependent lives offered negative models for [their daughters] to react against, but whose encouragement led them to create more positive models, in lives fulfilled as persons, writers, and mothers themselves" (Gros-Louis 13). The pattern in Audrey Thomas' writing seems to be that of a daughter who, after rebelling against and rejecting her mother and the limited life the mother represents, tries to offer her own daughters both independence and an inheritance. The daughter's rebellion is certainly present in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, but the daughter's fulfilment of her own life and acceptance of her mother are only tentatively suggested, to be articulated more

fully in later novels and short stories.

As Susan Rudy Dorscht points out, the title of *Songs My Mother Taught Me* sets up expectations of a feminist text, one that will emphasize a matriarchal rather than a patriarchal heritage (Rudy Dorscht, "Blown Figures," thesis, 45-46). On one level, the novel seems not to fulfil this expectation of a positive maternal heritage, since the "songs" Clara Cleary passes on to her daughter Isobel seems to consist mainly of fear, bitterness, and anger. Isobel's mother does, however, pass on a kind of strength to her daughter by developing in her the need to sing, or to speak, her own story, though the end of the novel leaves us unsure what Isobel will do with her heritage.

Though *Songs My Mother Taught Me* was published between *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures*, it can be read as the first novel of that trilogy chronologically. It was published in 1973 and was generally well reviewed. One reviewer praised its "sheer intensity of feeling" and "gritty realism" (Bannon 88); another found it "successful in achieving a resolution of realism and romanticism" (Stevens 260). Another called it "A raw, open-sore kind of book" (Brady 16) while a review in *Ms.* recognized the same angst but claimed it was "so dense with life that it transcends the pain" (Shulman 33). The references to realism underline the fact that *Songs My Mother Taught Me* is noticeably more traditional in structure than

either *Mrs. Blood* or *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island* (1971), the novels which preceded it. Perhaps because of this, one less favourable reviewer describes the novel as "a regression" for Thomas, despite "the superb rendering of the female consciousness" (Mulhallen 18-19).

Songs recounts the childhood and adolescence of Isobel Cleary, who grows up in New York state in the 1930s and 40s, one of two daughters in a repressed and unhappy family. Her father, Warren, is portrayed as a weak-minded, ineffectual man. Her mother, Clara, resentful over her joyless marriage and low social status, vents her frustration in hysterical outbursts at her husband and daughters. The only retreat for Isobel and her sister Jane is their yearly vacation at the country home of their maternal grandfather, Harry. Harry's place, Journey's End, remains a welcome haven for the girls until, in his old age, Harry sells it. Isobel, by then an adolescent, finds a very different escape from the stifling home atmosphere when she spends the summer working in a mental hospital.

One irony of the book is that, although the title implies that the mother will be the dominant influence on Isobel's life, Harry at first appears at least equally important, if not more so. If the person who most shapes the young protagonist is a male relative, what does this do to our perception of the novel as a female text? Here, as in Thomas'

other work, there is an element of the double-voiced narrative. Isobel, it seems, *wants* to make Harry the central figure of her story just as he was the hero of her childhood. Harry appears in the epigraph, the first character to be introduced, in the act of telling Isobel and Jane a story. The "story" Harry tells is actually a *mise-en-abyme*, a story-within-a-story in which the "story" is never actually told, but always deferred. Already we are warned that this will not be the simple, straightforward tale it purports to be. If we compare the title to the epigraph we may ask, what is really influential in Isobel's story: her mother's songs, or Harry's stories?

Like the story Harry does not tell in the epigraph, Isobel's story of her summers with Harry at Journey's End is constantly deferred and displaced. In the first three pages of the novel, her description of driving to Harry's place for the summer is interrupted four times by her mother's sharp words of caution. When Isobel leans back in her chair, Clara shouts to her husband, "Warne! Watch her, she'll fall!" When Warren lights a cigarette in the car, Clara says, "Mind you don't throw that out the window. It'll come back in on the girls." Isobel and Jane put their heads out the car window "despite [their] mother's dire warnings about another car coming along and beheading" them. And when their father slows down as he passes the bait shop, his wife says, "For heaven's

sake, Warren, it's already past their bedtime" (*Songs* 14-15). These warnings, all typical maternal worries which strike a responsive chord in any reader who has ever had a mother, might be humourous, were it not for the frequency of the warnings and the fact that they are almost the only statements Isobel's mother makes in the story's opening pages. Combined with the father's silence, the mother's obvious fear of life and her need to reproach others with "the stinging flick of [her] tongue" (16) sets up a rather sinister picture of their family life.

The first part of the first chapter ends with the family's arrival at Harry's cottage. The two girls are joyously welcomed by Harry, who carries them to the top of the steps "where the three of us, Harry, Jane and Isobel, would stand looking down in arrogant superiority at the superfluous couple below" (17). Again we sense the narrator's ambivalence. Isobel wants to write a story in which Harry is the central figure and her unhappy parents are superfluous. But the just-described journey to *Journey's End* foregrounds the family tensions and the mother's domineering personality, and we know already that Isobel, in telling her story, cannot ignore those forces.

Gradually a picture of Isobel's mother emerges. Not only does she worry to the point of nagging her husband and children, but her resentment towards them, towards the life

she lives, often erupts in vicious outbursts. "Anything could set my mother off" (21), Isobel tells her readers. As a small child, Isobel fears that someday her mother, in a rage, will throw the electric heater into the bathtub while Isobel and Jane are bathing (34)--a fear which does not seem so far-fetched after we read of some of her other tantrums. A family Christmas ends when "she tore the ornaments off the Christmas tree that night...crushed them under her heel, scattered the turkey carcass, wrenching it apart, outside in the backyard in the darkness," screaming "This is what I think of your Christmas! This is what I think of your goddamn Merry Christmas" (92-93). On another occasion "she smashed all the glass in all the frames of the countless family photographs on the old upright piano. 'That's what I think of your precious family. That's what I think of you all'" (112). The story of destroying the photographs is retold in *Blown Figures*: in this version, Isobel remembers her mother getting the girls out of bed, pointing to the broken glass and screaming "Walk across it and then you'll know how I feel every day of my cursed life" (*Blown Figures* 444). If Clara destroys things in order to express her anger towards what they represent, one of her most significant acts may be breaking the bathroom mirror with a cold-cream jar, implying that she resents not only her family but herself (*Songs* 94).

These acts of destruction, and the accompanying

outbursts, suggest that Clara is a woman struggling to make herself heard. This impression is supported by Isobel's many references to her mother's constant talk and letter-writing. "Clara, because she had no-one special in whom to confide, confided in everyone" (75). In her monologues she creates images of herself: the strangers to whom she talks know "how [she] struggled to 'keep their heads above water,' how it 'really got her down' sometimes, how she had 'sacrificed everything for her girls'" (75). Isobel, as narrator, uses phrases presumably culled from her mother's conversation to indicate how Clara wants others to see her. In the "wonderful tales of her youth" which she tells Isobel and Jane, she is young, wealthy, popular, heroic, and self-sacrificing. But like the unread letters of *Latakia*, Clara's stories do not reach her hearers, for Isobel claims that she "would select a tune and shove it into [her] head" to drown out her mother's words--yet Isobel does, apparently, remember the stories (109-110).

Through her acts of physical violence and her monologues, Clara attempts to tell her own story, to speak herself into existence. Although she is not a professional writer like other Thomas characters, she does write. After family fights, Clara gives her daughters

the twenty-page letter on the yellow stenographer's paper she used to keep her 'hand in.' Reiterating the family history...right up to the present day and beyond,

into the dark satanic future unless we changed our ways. In these letters would also be explained the reasons why she was striving to keep the family together 'in spite of everything,' and how we must never sell ourselves short in life (64).

Many years later, the Isobel of *Blown Figures* remembers that "for years her mother had written her letters during her own personal crises....Sometimes two in one day, sometimes three or four a week. How she had been or was being cheated or wronged by life, by 'them,' by some particular person. How she had sacrificed" (*Blown Figures* 21-22). She remembers that "'My mother talks to strangers....Tells everything all at once, leaves nothing to be guessed or deduced or silently understood....' She had the latest letter from her mother, unopened, in her bag" (25-26). The power of the mother's letters recurs in other Audrey Thomas stories: in *Intertidal Life*, Selene suffers an asthma attack every time a letter arrives from her mother (*Intertidal Life* 34, 96, 180).

Clara Cleary's need to speak and write her own version of the story, especially through letters, is reminiscent of another of Thomas' mother/writers, Alice, who keeps a journal after her husband leaves her because she needs "to sprawl, to scrawl, to pull out from [herself] great glistening sentences full of hate and fury and fling them, still wet and steaming onto these white pages" (*Intertidal Life* 30). The reader never fully understands why Clara needs to speak out so forcefully, perhaps because Isobel herself never understands.

Perplexed, Isobel asks herself, "Why did she hate us so?" (71), at the same time feeling oppressed by "the terrible burden of my mother's love" (75). She cannot reconcile the contradictions in her mother's behavior.

If Clara needs to make her voice heard, it is certainly not because she is silenced by a domineering husband. If anyone in the Cleary family appears at first glance to be silenced, it would have to be Warren, a man so lacking in a strong sense of identity that Isobel, as a child, thought her father's name was "Warn" because she associated it with her mother's frequent cautions (14). Warren J. Cleary, "afraid of life" (26), is held in contempt not only by his wife but also by his daughters, who accept their mother's evaluation of him as "weak both physically and morally," a failure because he "could not provide" (62). Clara not only attacks him for his inability to support the family in adequate style, but questions his masculinity and teaches her daughters to think of their father as "a pervert" (28).

The dominant mother and the weak-willed father, apparently so different, share a common need to make themselves known, to make themselves heard, perhaps because they are unable to speak to each other. Warren, like Clara, talks to strangers, though she is annoyed when he does so. He particularly likes to put on "his phony country-boy accent" on their visits to town from Harry's cottage (25). This false

accent, and the seemingly false identity it sets up, is not very different from Clara's portrayal of herself as the self-sacrificing wife and mother. Both Warren and Clara use their encounters with strangers to tell stories about themselves that are different from those they are able to tell within the family. Isobel tells us that her father "had an almost pathetic desire to be 'remembered' or 'known'" (171). His involvement in the Masons is one way of defining himself; it allows him to introduce himself as "Brother Warren Cleary. Three Forks Blue Lodge. H.B. Goodenough's son-in-law. Over at Trinity" (27). Not surprisingly, Clara denigrates the Masons; she "called it 'kid stuff' for 'Mama's boys and perverts'" (28).

When one summer Warren leaves his family to take a job as a travelling salesman, Isobel assumes that her "mother had shamed him into it." But in later years she reflects that her father may have needed

to have an adventure...to get away from my mother and her endless complaints about his inadequacies....Certainly, he liked meeting people....And he liked to feel important--God knows he didn't get any help from home in that direction--would have an expense account and be able to stay in hotels and to sign himself 'W.G. Cleary, Sales Representative' in the hotel register." (128)

A similar picture of the father emerges through the memories of Mrs. Blood/Isobel in *Mrs. Blood*. Here the father is "weak and bullied" and his daughter feels both ashamed and

protective of him. Once again we are told how "he put on this real upstate twang and began using words like 'missus' and 'real nice' and 'swell' and even 'ain't'" (*Mrs. Blood* 89). Here as in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, Warren's use of a different dialect, like his fondness for impressive-sounding names and titles, shows his need to define himself in ways other than the way his wife and daughters define him. Both he and Clara create themselves through language.

But if Warren's need to create an identity for himself is based on his need to escape his family's contempt, what motivates Clara? Obviously she is not silenced by a domineering husband. We know little about her relationship with her own parents. She seems to feel some bitterness towards her father, Harry, perhaps because her daughters idolize him so much: "In her worst tirades" she refers to him contemptuously as "Your precious Harry" (*Songs* 111). Clara's own mother dies when Isobel is quite small and the main impact she leaves on Isobel is the embarrassment of having her grandmother drop dead at the school Christmas party. We are given only the briefest glimpse of Clara's response to the crisis, when Isobel hears "through the noise, the dreadful sound of my mother, crying, 'Mother oh Mother Mother oh my Mother'" (55). Though Clara's distraught cry attests to the close bond between mother and daughter, we know too little about Clara's own youth to know whether anything in her

relationship with her parents, or in her parents' relationship with each other, triggered the deep resentment she brings to her own family life.

One clue to the source of Clara's bitterness may be found in Isobel's references to her mother's reading of "endless ladies' magazines" and "the romances she brought home from the lending library" (155, 72). The mention of ladies' magazines reminds us of the "clean, well-lighted mythology" of the ladies' magazines in *Mrs. Blood* or the magazine-style cover of *Real Mothers*. Romance novels, like ladies' magazines, recur frequently in Thomas' writing as the sources of images of a particular socially constructed view of womanhood. Both are discussed explicitly in *Intertidal Life*, in which Alice and her daughter discuss the images of women and men found in the romance novels they are reading, and Alice shows Raven advertisements from old magazines as examples of "how women viewed men in 1937" (*Intertidal Life* 101). A passage from *Songs My Mother Taught Me* captures the image of femininity in this magazine mythology: "I yearned over the bright and shining mothers in the *Journal* and *Woman's Home Companion*, slim-waisted, beautifully groomed (even in the kitchen) or out walking with their golden daughters in identical seersucker mother-daughter dresses" (*Songs* 73).

As this passage suggests, the lure of this well-ordered feminine world appeals not only to Clara but to Isobel as

well. Whether Isobel likes it or not, she has inherited many of her mother's values. "Mother equated her misery with lack of 'station' and 'nice things.' And, being my mother's daughter, I did this too. Some days I felt that if I could *only* have a wristwatch with a leather strap, or a pair of shorts from Best & Co., the world would come right again" (65). Part of what oppresses Clara, and, by extension, her daughters, is a society that, through the images presented in magazines and novels, expects her to be the perfectly groomed, contented wife, supported by a strong man who provides his family with an abundance of material goods. Instead, she has to live with the knowledge "that she had been intimate with this *FAILURE*, this lame excuse for a man" (71). Clara not only resents her husband for not being the hero of a romance novel, but she is also discontented with her daughters, particularly Isobel, who will "never be the golden girl she had dreamed of but simply...another of life's misfits" (155). And her destruction of the bathroom mirror suggests that she is disgusted above all with herself, with the imperfect body which leads Isobel to observe: "I could never imagine [my mother] young and running or in any way connected with the heroines of the romances she brought home from the lending library" (72). Clara's need to tell her own story, even if it requires anger and violence, stems from her inability to accept the discontinuity between her own life and the

"stories" her society tells about what a woman's life should be.

Clara is typical of the kind of mother Elizabeth Fisher describes when she says: "Since mothers of families are expected to live vicariously through the achievements of husbands and children, they are subject to much anxiety....This anxiety, and the dissatisfaction, often unvoiced even to herself, with her own status, is transmitted to the daughter as a lack of confidence, sometimes a hidden rage or hostility" (Fisher 5). Clara's case is more extreme: her hostility has gone well beyond the point of being hidden, and her dissatisfaction with her own status is certainly voiced. A similar perception of the mother-daughter relationship appears in Judith Arcana's book *Our Mothers' Daughters*, in which the author points out the extent to which the traditionally strained relationship between mothers and daughters is created by the expectations placed upon women in patriarchal society.

Contemporary definitions have been, ironically, taught to us by our mothers, but created by the culture inside of which the mother/daughter relationship develops. Thus, as our culture is male-created and dominated, our expectations have been based upon men's experience and desires....The relationship is structured, at present, upon assumptions and conclusions that are false to ourselves and for each other; that is why so many mother/daughter relationships are filled with pain." (Arcana 5)

So Clara Cleary lashes out in anger against her inability

to live the life of material success, physical beauty, and submission to a powerful husband, as it is portrayed in ladies' magazines and romance novels. Yet she attempts to make Isobel into a "golden girl" (*Songs* 155) who will fulfil those same impossible expectations.

One of the few times in the novel when Isobel's mother appears happy and content is described when the family receives their inheritance from Grandmother Cleary's estate and Clara goes on a furniture-buying spree. When she announces the new acquisitions to Isobel and Jane, she appears "flushed and girlish; even her voice seemed to have taken on a girlish lilt" (67). Isobel, at first skeptical about any attempt to improve their lot in life, eventually joins the renovations enthusiastically and redecorates her own room. But when she invites some girls from school to come see her new room, they fail to show up and are unable to call because the Cleary's phone has been disconnected. As the money runs out, the bills pile up, and as the novelty wears off the new furniture, the hapless Clearys are once again unable to come up to ladies'-magazine standards. This chapter, which began so hopefully, ends with Isobel "inside [her] perfect bedroom," whispering "God...please let me die" (70).

Another rare occasion on which Isobel views her mother positively is seen when an intruder appears at Journey's End in the middle of the night and Clara, unable to convince

Warren to go out and see what the noise is, goes out herself and threatens the stranger with Harry's rifle. She "stood there now flushed and triumphant, the rifle in her hands.... Proud, rosy-cheeked....Defender of her brood" (101). The end result of the incident is to make her husband look even more foolish and ineffectual: when Harry asks, the next morning "Where were you, Warren?" Warren can only grin "sheepishly" (102).

In describing this scene, Thomas is again retelling a story, for a similar situation occurs in *Mrs. Blood*. In the *Mrs. Blood* version, which also occurs at the cottage, it is Isobel's father rather than her mother who wields the shotgun, and the target is not an intruder but Isobel, Jane, and two boys, parked in a car outside the cottage. The few changed details completely alter the impact of the scene so that Warren appears ridiculous and Isobel feels "only rage at [her mother] for making him do this thing and humiliation that he was weak and bullied" (89). The end result is the same as that of the shotgun incident in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*: the mother appears strong and the father weak. It does not appear to make very much difference who carries the gun: the balance of power within the family does not change. Neither pointing a rifle nor buying new furniture can effectively and permanently change Clara and Warren Cleary's world. Even Clara's attempt to leave the family is abortive and barely

rates a mention, and Warren's summer adventure as a travelling salesman ends in failure (*Songs* 112, 144). For Clara, unable to redesign her own surroundings or shape her daughters' lives to her satisfaction, the language of her rambling conversations, her angry letters, and her violent outbursts becomes her only means of defining herself.

Isobel's greatest fear seems to be that she will never be able to break free from her mother's influence. In a passage that many critics of *Songs* have commented on, Isobel tells us:

Once I hid two rag dolls, mother and baby, whom I called 'Me' and 'Mimi,' in one of these stumps... and couldn't find them again....Ten years later I came upon them by accident, bleached featureless by the wind and sun and rain--the big doll's leg chewed ragged by some forest creature. It was like finding two small corpses; and I left them there, covered them up with pine needles and went away. For all I know they are still there in the forest. Isobel, perhaps they are your totems? (20-21)

Her fear that she will never be able to separate herself from her mother, that she will wither in the oppressive atmosphere of her family as surely as the rag doll is decayed by the elements, leads Isobel to interpret the mother and baby doll, with their echoing names, as symbolic of her relationship with her mother. "With almost deterministic resignation, Isobel accepts that, ultimately, her fate is reflected in two rag dolls, Me and Mimi, a mother and daughter symbiotically intertwined as their names suggest. Abandoned...for ten years, the dolls have been bleached featureless and rendered

almost indistinguishable from each other" (Gottlieb and Keitner, "Narrative Technique" 366).

Isobel is aware that her mother's constant effort to mould her into a pretty, popular girl is Clara's attempt to live her own life vicariously through Isobel and Jane. "At six I already understood, although I could not have articulated it, that Jane and I were the dream images projected above the wasteland of our mother's life" (*Songs* 109). The same impulse drives Clara to fight her daughters' battles for social acceptance and then to attack them, "weeping, 'What have I done to deserve such daughters? Look in the mirror, Isobel, look at your face'" (111). Isobel's struggle is to avoid the fate of Persephone, the fate of "Me" and "Mimi": a life lived within her mother's shadow.

Isobel's need to break free from this maternal bond leads her to take a job in the state mental hospital the summer she is seventeen, after Harry, who is aging and losing his power as a magical presence in Isobel's life, sells Journey's End. The shocking world of Ward 88--"the shit ward" (166)--gives Isobel a new perspective on her family. "In many ways it was easier for me to cope with the avowed madness of Ward 88 than the glossed-over violence of my home...The terrible strain of all those years of pretending we were a 'normal' family had taken a terrible toll on me. Those crazy ladies, who were known by everybody, including themselves, to be mad, were

refreshing" (169). In one patient's room, Isobel finds, among a box of old greeting cards, a verse whose sentimental words-- "For Mother dear/ You've always been/My angel and my guide"-- belong to the same discourse as that of Clara's ladies' magazines. The incongruity of those words in the setting of Ward 88 suggests the discontinuity between that idealized image of motherhood and the reality of Clara and Isobel's relationship.

Earlier in the novel, Isobel, reflecting on her mother's behavior, asks herself:

Which was worse, Isobel? The sound of the key from the inside, locking her in, or sitting downstairs or waiting in your bedroom for the key to turn again? When she might burst out like a circus animal, like the real Grace Poole, roaring, biting, eager to attack.

Or when she called us all together and laughed her little laugh and asked us to forget? (57)

Isobel's exposure to "avowed madness" (169) in the mental hospital suggests that, though her mother's violent outbursts were traumatic, her attempts to fit into an idealized image of motherhood--to be, perhaps, a "real mother"--may be even more offensive. Clara's anger, like the mad ravings of the women on Ward 88, is at least an honest reaction to a situation for which the accepted discourse of society has no language. We see hints of this same anger in Isobel's response to her family life: she identifies her younger self as the child "Who had killed her grandmother and longed to kill her mother and

possibly her pa" (32); at seventeen, doomed to spend the summer alone with her parents, it seems "incredible" to her that she "wouldn't murder one or both of them before the summer was out" (157).

The summer at the mental hospital ends when Isobel loses her virginity to John, a fellow hospital worker. Though she is by no means in love with John, their encounter is a joyous one for Isobel, since she experiences "the sheer delight of at last doing something that I had wanted to do for so long and which was, after all, *pace* mother, such a slippery, strange, and utterly delightful experience" (229). The phrase "*pace* mother" indicates that for Isobel, at least part of the pleasure of the experience is in defying her mother's attitude of caution and refinement. In a review of *Songs* entitled "The Bondage of the Daughter," Anne Montagnes argues that this sexual initiation is the act which finally frees Isobel from her subjection to her parents and allows her to become an independent adult. According to Montagnes' interpretation, Isobel's experience "proves that sex is the most important thing...the one great good she found in life" (Montagnes 47). Other critics see the sexual experience as less significant than the experience of working on Ward 88: one refers to Isobel's sexual experience as "the...loss of that other, lesser virginity," (Brady 17). This view seems to me to be more consistent with the novel itself than is Montagnes'

interpretation. The loss of virginity here is not as significant as it is, for example, to Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Important as the sexual act may be to Isobel Cleary, it is really only the culmination of her whole summer experience, which she refers to as the loss of her "mind's virginity" (168). Going to work at the hospital, not having sex with John, is "the first truly independent act of [her] life" (159); the sexual initiation is only a part of that liberation, a physical acting out of a change that has already occurred in Isobel's psyche.

After her summer on the Hill, Isobel is ready not only to leave home for college but also to make other plans of her own, outside of the college education which her mother wants her to have. No great reconciliation between Clara and Isobel closes the book, but Isobel does look at her mother with greater understanding as she leaves her, seeing her as "So innocent. So angry. Loveless. Growing old. I wanted to comfort her--realized not that I had never loved her but that she had never let me love her and that these were two entirely different things" (231). Though Isobel does not accept her mother in the way that some of Thomas' older heroines are able to do, she is able to view her with compassion, perhaps because her summer of independence has placed some distance between her and her mother, freed her of the threat of forever being "Me" to Clara's "Mini." She recognizes that her mother

is, in some ways, "essentially...right" about life: "Life was cruel, people hurt and betrayed one another, grew old and died alone. And did not rise again" (231-232).

This final encounter with Clara is balanced by a final phone call to Harry, who is still feisty though greatly diminished by age. As Isobel moves out into the world she leaves behind the two giants of her childhood, her mother and grandfather, who have influenced her more than anyone else. The book ends with some suggestion of hope in the juxtaposition of these two. If Isobel can balance her mother's knowledge of life's cruelty with Harry's dictum that "nothing in life is worth clenching your hands about" (103) she may be able to become a more balanced woman than her mother; she may learn to speak and write herself into existence as Clara did, but in a productive rather than a destructive way. Since Isobel dreams of being a writer, this seems to be a possibility. Alex Shulman's review of the novel concludes that "Isobel...having painfully learned all her mother's songs, seems equipped to get through anything" (Shulman 34), while Lois Gottlieb and Wendy Keitner suggest that, while Isobel's tensions are not fully resolved, "like Rachel Cameron at the conclusion of Laurence's *A Jest of God*, Isobel Cleary does manage in the end to dare rejection and ridicule in order to commit herself to human and sexual relationships" (Gottlieb and Keitner 366-367).

This hopeful reading of the ending of *Songs My Mother Taught Me* seems to be compromised by the fact that when it was published Thomas had already written *Mrs. Blood*, and that *Blown Figures* would appear the next year. In these "sequels," we see a different future for Isobel, one in which she is no more successful than her mother has been at confronting her inner demons. The division in Isobel's personality evident in *Songs*, where Isobel as first-person narrator sometimes speaks of herself, or to herself, in the third person, becomes progressively more marked in *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures*, until we have at the end of *Blown Figures* an Isobel who is probably as mad as the women on Ward 88. Like their madness and Clara's, Isobel's madness may be the only possible response to what she has experienced, but it eventually thwarts her ability to tell her own story and, like the mad women, she is reduced to silence.

As we have seen, Audrey Thomas makes little attempt to distinguish between the heroines of her retold stories. Rather than giving each of them a distinct history to simulate an independent reality for her characters, she prefers to rewrite different versions of the same story, often changing only names and minor details. Because of this, the experiences of the woman who shares Isobel Cleary's name and history in *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures* can be read as only one possible story of Isobel. Other Thomas characters--Rachel

in *Latakia*, Miranda in *Prospero on the Island*, Alice in *Intertidal Life*, and many of the protagonists of the short stories--share Isobel's background, as does Audrey Thomas herself. These women, including the author, are far from carefree, but they are successful writers who have learned to tell their own stories, to create rather than destroy. They may also be seen as possible Isobels, Isobels who have moved out of the mother's shadow.

The autobiographical element we have already seen in Thomas' writing makes it easy to identify Audrey Thomas with Isobel Cleary, and to assume that Clara Cleary, like the nameless, menacing mothers of other Thomas protagonists, is to some extent based on the author's own mother. In an interview with Thomas in 1973, the year *Songs* was published, the interviewer commented that

By publishing *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, Thomas realizes she runs the risk of being sued for libel by her mother, who lives in Connecticut. Asked how she feels about this she replies: 'It does worry me but there is no point showing it to her as she would forbid it to be published and I feel it must.'
(Appelbe 34A)

The portrait of a troubled, destructive mother-daughter relationship is obviously more than loosely based on Thomas' autobiographical experience.

If Thomas identifies herself as the victimized daughter of a hysterical housewife in the 1940s, how does she portray the divorced mother of growing daughters in the 1970s--a

character with whom she might also be identified? We have already looked at *Latakia*, "Harry and Violet," and "Crossing the Rubicon," in which Thomas is apparently writing her own experience of the mother-daughter relationship from the mother's perspective. Other short stories from *Real Mothers* and *Goodbye Harold, Good Luck*, as well as the novel *Intertidal Life*, expand this perspective and generally portray the mother-daughter relationship as a close, positive, nurturing one. The relationships portrayed in Thomas' fictions parallel the pattern described by Judith Arcana:

Most of the women I interviewed describe their relations with their daughters in a far more accepting...vein than they do their relations with their mothers, and appear more willing to work through their conflicts with daughters than with mothers. This must be based at least partly in the fact that in relation to mothers, they perceive themselves as powerless, or at least consistently frustrated, in terms of effecting change, and see their daughters as 'possibilities.'" (Arcana 205).

Audrey Thomas, by portraying mother-daughter relationships more positively in stories where the mother's experience parallels Thomas' own, seems to suggest that she is one of those women who sees more "possibilities" in her relationships with her daughters than in her relationship with her own mother.

One such story is "The Dance," from the 1986 book *Goodbye Harold, Good Luck*, which deals with many of the ambiguities of the mother-daughter relationship. The protagonist of this

story is a middle-aged, unmarried woman, who has to come to terms with the fact that her fifteen-year-old daughter is entering the world of romance and sexuality just as she herself seems to be leaving it. The two are vacationing together in Greece. While they travel by ferry to the island where they will stay, the mother reflects that "I like going places by boat; I suppose it has something to do with 'crossing the waters,' which to me is always symbolic as well as real" (*Goodbye Harold* 74).

This observation is appropriate to the story, as both characters are approaching important crossings on their life-journeys. The mother is delighted to discover that her teenage daughter "loves to travel on boats....She has decided that she likes the whole sense of 'getting there' and is willing to wait for 'there' while she enjoys the voyage" (75). The daughter's willingness to appreciate the process of travel rather than being impatient for the destination obviously applies to her attitude towards her own maturation process. As we see her through her mother's eyes, she is moving gracefully into womanhood without rushing the journey.

The mother's struggle is to adopt the same accepting attitude toward her own journey. At the beginning of the story she muses about the implications of such expressions as "on the shelf" and "well preserved" as they apply to women of her age; these words define her in a way she can only accept

by subverting the meaning of "on the shelf" to suggest that "what is 'on the shelf' can presumably be taken off at some later date, like a jar of preserves sealed up in August to be enjoyed in the chilly days of winter....Or so I tell myself, deriving a little comfort from this pretty metaphor" (71). Her single state has some uncomfortable side effects. She feels isolated from the other tourists on the island: as a single woman with her daughter she has no place in the family-oriented atmosphere. She is conscious not only of her singleness but also of her age. When she compares the colour of her daughter's hair to the colour of the waxing moon, we are aware not only of the common association of the moon with femaleness, but also of the fact that waxing implies waning. If the daughter is waxing into womanhood, must the mother be waning? Their experience at a Greek disco suggests that this may be so, and naturally this is difficult for the mother to accept.

While the daughter chooses from among a bevy of young Greek men who want to dance with her, the mother sits alone, feeling "like a chaperone or more accurately one of those Spanish duennas who followed well-bred Spanish girls around. All I need is a large mantilla, some jewels on my arthritic fingers, and an aristocratic nose" (83). The nice balance Thomas strikes here between humour and resentment captures the ambiguity of the mother's feelings, pleased at the attention

her daughter is attracting yet regretting her own inability to attract such attention anymore. Later, when they visit the palace of an ancient queen who "kept a harem of young boys," the mother wonders "at what age she took up this interesting hobby" (84). Again, the humour is present, but so is a more serious reflection on society's assumption that older women are not sexual beings.

The story ends with the mother's memory of a Greek folk dance in which she once participated, a dance similar to the one her daughter and the Greek young people will dance later that night after the tourists have left the disco and the American dance music has been shut off. Significantly, the mother was first introduced to this joyful, life-affirming folk dance by a woman of fifty who obviously was still very involved in life and in seeking new experiences. While we admire the mother's healthy acceptance of the fact that it is time for her daughter to "join the dance" of life and sexuality, we are encouraged to believe that, despite her own fears and the expectations of society, the mother does not yet need to withdraw from the dance.

This story presents a very positive mother-daughter relationship---they are obviously comfortable with one another; they speak to each other with humour and trust. The mother's attitude to her daughter's growing maturity is laudable, but her insecurity about her own position gives the story a

realistic sense of ambiguity. This is typical of Thomas' most positive portrayals of mothers and daughters: the relationship is a healthy one, beneficial to both mother and daughter, but it is never oversimplified or idealized.

In the title story of *Goodbye Harold, Good Luck* we again find a mother and daughter travelling together. The journey this time is from Vancouver to Dawson Creek by train and bus, both modes of travel which, like the ferry boat in "The Dance," emphasize the process of "getting there." Francine is taking a vacation away from a husband who demeans and ridicules both her and her daughter. She has reached a point in her marriage where she feels unbearably restricted and believes that her husband hates her. This feeling manifests itself in the physical symptom of an inability to breathe.

Francine, like the woman in "The Dance," feels out of place appearing in public as a woman without a man. When her ten-year-old daughter Emily is with her she feels "safely defined" (205). Like Rachel in *Latakia*, she recognizes that society defines a woman according to her role as a mother. But Francine does not bring Emily along on the trip simply so that she can be identified as a mother; she feels that Emily needs to escape the home situation as much as she herself does. Both mother and daughter are targets of the perfectionist husband's ridicule. Though this situation is unfortunate, it has obviously created a bond between mother

and daughter. Like the two characters in "The Dance," Francine and Emily relate easily and comfortably to each other, enjoying a camaraderie which the domineering husband and father does not share.

As Francine sits alone in a hotel bar, her daughter upstairs watching a movie, she reviews some of the confrontations which led to the crisis in her marriage. The entertainment in the bar includes a female comedian telling sexual jokes, and a stripper--women who play up to and underscore negative views of women. This atmosphere provides an appropriate backdrop for Francine to reflect on the subtler and perhaps more insidious oppression of which she and her daughter have been the victim. Realizing that Emily, at ten, has already started to lash out against her father, she worries "Would Emily grow up hating men?" (218). She wants to pass on to her daughter a positive image of what it means to be a woman, though her own memories and the activity around her in the hotel bar remind us that society often undermines a positive self-image for women. Francine does not want Emily's definition of womanhood to exclude the possibility of close relationships with men; she only wants those relationships, for her daughter and for herself, to be positive, loving, and self-affirming.

The message that Emily discovers written in the steam on the bathroom mirror--"Goodbye Harold, Good Luck"--suggests to

Francine the possibility that she, too, could leave her domineering husband with just such a cavalier attitude. The light-hearted tone of the message and the carefree leave-taking it implies contrasts with the desperation of Francine's thoughts about her marriage, and perhaps reminds her that she is more free than she thinks she is. The woman who left the message on the mirror has exercised power by writing an ending to her own story--a story Francine and Emily can only imagine--and in the traces that woman leaves behind, Francine sees the possibility that she, too, can write a new story for herself and her daughter.

The closeness evident in these stories between the divorced mothers and their daughters is present also in an earlier story from *Real Mothers*, "Natural History." The main character in this story is identified only as "the mother" (*Real Mothers* 25). She too is a single mother, living alone in a cottage on an island with her daughter in order to "complete her recovery" (24). Whether she is recuperating from an illness or recovering emotionally from the trauma of divorce, we are not told. We do, however, read her musings on the word "recovery." "Nice word that, re-cover. To cover yourself over again, something essential having been ripped away, like a deep rip in the upholstery" (24). What has been ripped away is not only a relationship but part of the woman's self-definition, her identity as a wife, and she, like other

Audrey Thomas characters, is consciously defining herself, reconstructing an image of herself whole, re-covered. In this she is similar to the women in *Latakia*, "Real Mothers," "Crossing the Rubicon," and "Goodbye Harold, Good Luck." "Natural History," more than any of these, emphasizes the importance of the daughter in the mother's attempt to recover herself.

The story's setting is very similar to that of the opening and closing sections of *Intertidal Life*. A divorced mother is spending the summer with her daughter in a cottage on an island. Mother and daughter have laid out an ambitious schedule of plans for their summer activities, but the schedule goes unnoticed as they enjoy the summer and each other's company. "Natural History" unfolds on a night when mother and daughter are sleeping outdoors, watching the full moon. The mother is reminded of the association between the moon and woman: "The old triple moon goddess, corresponding to the three phases of woman" (27). But the fact that the moon is also associated with madness reminds us that there is a dark side to female experience--a dark side the mother shares with her friend at the beach, whose husband has left her, when both women admit to violent desires to kill their ex-husbands.

This threat of darkness, of disorder, is embodied in other vaguely threatening forces within the story. The rat that gnaws a hole in the cottage wall, and the mother's plans

to poison the rat, hint at menace, as does the daughter's description of their house as "something that a witch might live in" (26). On the day the story takes place, they are visited by a young woman who has gone blind as a result of diabetes that has not yet been stabilized. The mother recognizes that the visitor's blindness and obesity are "signs that things inside had got out of control" (26). This fear of the disorderly element of life--disease, violence, rejection, the threat of strangers, the rat that gnaws at the cottage wall--moves like an undercurrent beneath their idyllic summer.

Yet these potential threats to their happiness do not drive a wedge between mother and daughter as such threats do in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. Here, they grow closer to one another. This may be partly because this mother, unlike Clara Cleary, recognizes that instability is not necessarily negative. The summer activities of the mother and daughter underline the creative possibilities of disorder. The daughter, Clytie--named, we are told, "not for the moon, but after the sunflower"--is "very orderly" (27). She makes up a schedule of the useful and educational activities she and her mother will pursue during the summer and posts it on the fridge, "decorated in the corners with orange suns and purple starfish" (27). Predictably, the schedule is ignored as summer lethargy sets in and time is taken up with less edifying activities such as reading aloud and painting one

another's toenails. The mother struggles to balance the need for order and structure with the need to experience the kind of warmth and spontaneous delight she and her daughter have found in one another's company and in their island home. If the house is a witch's house, that is not necessarily negative either: a witch can be a symbol of female power, as is the moon, whose silvery light permeates this story.

Yet the mother remembers that the moon shines only with the reflected light of the sun. Her daughter's name is a reference to the Greek myth in which "Clytie became the sunflower...because she adored Apollo and always turned her head to follow him across the sky" (Coldwell, "Natural Herstory" 145). Like the mother in "Crossing the Rubicon," this mother, also a writer, wonders what myths about male-female relationships her daughter will inherit. The mother has herself experienced a painful divorce or separation, and she is raising her daughter in an unsafe world where she must learn to beware of strangers who "are usually men" (33). Yet, like Francine in "Goodbye Harold, Good Luck," this mother does not want her daughter to grow up rejecting relationships with men, any more than she wishes her to exist only to adore a god-like male Apollo. She must grow up aware of "the moon..., female... dependent on the sun, yet so much brighter, seemingly, against the darkness of the sky; so much more mysterious, changing her shape, controlling the waters,

gathering it all in her net" (29).

One of the books that Clytie and her mother read aloud is *The Wind in the Willows*, and as they read the mother thinks of the book's anthropomorphic animals, which parallel her own tendency to think of and talk to her cat in human terms. Then she remembers the rat that has gnawed through the cottage wall and reminds herself that "the rat was real" (29). She is, perhaps, contrasting that rat with the amiable talking Rat of *The Wind in the Willows*. Is the literal rat more real than the literary Rat? Both versions of the story may be valid, as are the different possible interpretations of the relation between female and male, sun and moon. Still the mother wonders which her daughter will accept as the "real" story.

She believes that the answer lies not in sharply contrasting opposites but in balance, in teaching her daughter to be "strong and yet still loving." Perspective is the key: "The trick was, of course, to try and get the right distance on everything; to stand in just the right relationship to it all. But how? Would her daughter be any better at it than she was?" (33). As she lies awake by moonlight, the mother experiences a brief moment of illumination in which all the conflicting images she has been remembering: "moon, blind girl, rat, her own solitude, the cat...her daughter, the still moment" come together in "wholeness, harmony, radiance; all of it making a wonderful kind of sense" (34). Her immediate

reaction is to reach out towards her sleeping child in a loving and protective gesture.

This story, in which mother's and daughter's nurturing of each other is vital to the mother's effort to redefine herself as a single woman, shares common concerns with the stories we have examined in this chapter and the last. All these mothers wonder what stories about womanhood, about women's relationships with men, they will pass on to their daughters. Each of them strives for the kind of balance between order and disorder sought in "Natural History"--an image of womanhood which is positive but not rigidly defined, which will allow the daughter to write herself into story as the mother has struggled to do.

The concerns, characters, and in many cases the settings of these stories recur in *Intertidal Life*, as Thomas once again rewrites a story to explore further nuances of meaning. Thomas has mentioned that almost all her novels grew out of short stories, and *Intertidal Life* springs most directly from "Natural History." The novel and story share the setting of the island cabin, the imagery of intertidal creatures, and the focus on mother/daughter relationships. In the novel the relationship between mother and daughter is less central, set as it is within the larger context of a marital breakup and an analysis of female friendships. Still, the intimacy between main character Alice and her three daughters, especially the

youngest, Flora, remains a central concern. If Isobel Cleary shows us Thomas' autobiographical perspective on the adolescent daughter's relationship with her mother, Alice Hoyle expands on what we have already seen in the short stories--the other side of Thomas' experience, a mother's relationship with her adolescent daughters.

Although the novel explores the dynamics of female relationships in a world almost devoid of men, it is not a simple tribute to the all-healing power of female friendships. At times Alice does see her intimacy with her friends Stella, Trudi, and Selene in just such terms, as when she imagines "growing between her and the other three women, a great twisted vine, or rope. So that, if she had had to step out into the dark, she could...pull herself forward safely, even in the most severe of storms...and know that so long as she held on tightly to their friendship she would be *all right*" (*Intertidal Life* 164). Her relationship with her daughters is similarly idealized, as she reflects in the communal closeness of their cabin. "The girls' bedroom had a cloth curtain at the entrance, that was all. Each one could feel the others' presences in the night. Sorority. In the best sense" (147). But sorority does not, in fact, provide an ultimate solution to Alice's problems. Stella and Trudi are both attracted to Peter, and Stella becomes his lover, although she knows Alice still loves him. Alice often uses sun/moon imagery in her

exploration of male/female relationships, and her description of Peter's influence over her friends is reminiscent of the reference to Apollo in "Natural History." "Peter was the sun, the hub, around which first Alice, then Anne-Marie, then Penny, and now Stella and Trudl, revolved" (239). As Joan Coldwell points out, "The failure of the community of women [in *Intertidal Life*] rests on a stereotype of heterosexual woman, willing to betray a female friend for the sake of connection with a man" (Coldwell, "Natural Herstory" 143).

Likewise, Alice's relationship with her older daughters, Hannah and Anne, is compromised by their loyalty to their father. As she tells her friend Selene, "I know that they feel I'm responsible for the breakup of our marriage. They align themselves with Peter in very subtle ways and I try not to care" (*Intertidal Life* 181). She is aware that Hannah, the eldest, is especially close to her father: "She and Peter smoked up together, had little grown-up talks about 'love' and 'caring'. Alice was worried about her but didn't know what to say" (202). But the same passage describes the co-operative relationship Alice shares with her oldest daughter, and also with Anne, even while Anne questions Alice's unorthodox lifestyle (203).

But the closest mother-daughter relationship in the *Intertidal Life*--perhaps, as Coldwell claims, the "most positive relationship in the novel" (Coldwell 145) is the bond

Alice shares with her youngest daughter Flora. Flora is only four years old during the year following her parents' separation, the year which takes up most of the novel. The story of this year, however, is related within a frame. In the opening and closing sections, Alice and Flora are alone on the island seven years later. In the absence of husband and other children, a closeness develops between the mother and her near-adolescent daughter that recalls and expands upon the mother/daughter relationship in "Natural History."

As we saw in the last chapter, *Intertidal Life* is also a powerful exploration of language and of memory, and of their connection to each other. This concern for language and its role in the re-telling of Alice's story finds its way into the Alice/Flora relationship as Alice wonders how much she should tell Flora of a past Flora barely recalls. When Flora claims not to remember a scene from her childhood, Alice wonders, "Why am I doing this to her?" (*Intertidal Life* 253). She points out to Flora that "All we know is what our parents and relatives choose to tell us." But to Flora's observation "And a lot of that is probably lies," Alice responds, "I'd say 'myths,' not lies. Not usually" (277).

This exchange takes place while Alice and Flora are cleaning out old steamer trunks and Flora finds a pair of baby shoes, once Alice's given to Alice by her own mother the last time Alice visited her. The suggestion of continuity between

three generations of women is made more complex by our knowledge that Alice's mother is essentially the same mother as Isobel Cleary's, the same mother who haunts the memories of all Thomas' characters and of their creator. Alice sounds like an adult Isobel as she admits "I didn't *hate* my father, I just found him repulsive. I hated my mother; used to--not any more" (154). She reflects on the "awful and awesome... power...our mothers have over us...the giant shadow mother we saw reflected on the nursery wall" (180-181). It is easy to see in these references to Alice's mother the selfish, volatile, vindictive Clara Cleary, the mother who engulfs her daughter in a torrent of words yet who, in Thomas' books, never speaks in her own voice but is always created through her daughters' stories. Alice Hoyle is her "successful" daughter who, unlike Isobel, does not go mad but becomes a nurturing creatrix-mother herself. Although Alice follows her comment on the "giant shadow mother" with the "equally horrible" thought "that I might become, perhaps am already, that kind of figure to my children," the overall impression left by *Intertidal Life* confirms Selene's reply that Alice is "a wonderful mother" (181).

It is not only Thomas' autobiographical perspective that makes Alice and her counterparts in the short stories "good" mothers while Clara is a "bad" mother. Alice can be seen as the Isobel who learned and profited from her mother's songs.

Perhaps because she lives in a different era than her mother did, Alice has a creative rather than a destructive outlet for her "songs." Her conversation with Flora about the myths passed on by parents suggests that Alice's intense concern for language and storytelling have made her aware of the mythological, constructed nature of her own stories. Like the mothers in "Natural History," "Goodbye Harold, Good Luck," and "Crossing the Rubicon," Alice is concerned about what stories Flora will inherit about male-female relationships, about a woman's place in the world. That is why she worries about Flora's reading of romance novels and tries to counterbalance their effect by providing, in conversation, her own critical subtext to them. Alice is able to select, to some extent, what she will pass on, what myths Flora will inherit from her. Perhaps because she has other creative outlets, Alice does not share Clara Cleary's need to indiscriminately burden her daughter with her own history/ mythology; rather, she is able to choose what she will tell and influence Flora's reality by the stories she tells her.

Intertidal Life leaves unanswered the question of whether Alice, or Audrey Thomas, has come to terms with the mythology of her own mother. The gift of the baby shoes, which is the last of the novel's few references to Alice's mother, is an unusually benign memory, which perhaps suggests that Alice is making peace with this aspect of her own history. A more

complete resolution of this relationship is found in two short stories, both written after *Intertidal Life*: "Mothering Sunday" from *Goodbye Harold, Good Luck*, (1986) and "Sunday Morning, June 4, 1989" from *The Wild Blue Yonder* (1990).

The first story begins with a return to the motif of the Virgin Mary: "Hail Mary, Wounded art Thou among Women." The speaker compares the French word *blessé*--to wound--with the English *blessed*. "Hail Mary, Blessed art Thou Among Women. All the Marys bleed" (*Goodbye Harold* 153). Thomas' reader is on familiar ground here, contemplating Mary as the head of a bleeding, birthing body of mothers throughout the ages.

But in this story, the focus is not on the first-person narrator's own experience of motherhood, though she is a mother. As she sits alone in a restaurant on Mother's Day, waiting for a friend to join her, she muses on motherhood, on "bloody Mary" (155), on the Mother's Day traditions of her past. But the centre of the story is the narrator's memory of a recent visit to her own eighty-nine-year-old mother, who each time she visits gives her some souvenir of the past (the source, no doubt, of Alice's baby shoes). When the speaker notices among her mother's keepsakes an empty picture frame, she asks her mother "whose picture the frame had been for. She said, 'My mother.' I asked her where the picture was now. She said, 'I tore it up'" (159).

No further explanation is given. The narrator leaves,

somewhat disturbed by this brief glimpse into "something terrible and private, something between mothers and daughters, the dark side of all this, the wounds as well as the blessings." She is well aware of the dark side of her own relationship with her mother. "I have wounded her many times; she has wounded me. We don't talk about this" (159). Perhaps things unspoken cannot be said to be "resolved," but there is certainly an acceptance here of responsibility on both sides, and a willingness to leave things unsaid that perhaps recognizes the power of silence. As the speaker remembers this incident, she is also rehearsing it, preparing to turn it into narrative for her friend Lydia when Lydia arrives for lunch. She is writing a story that allows her to accept her mother, wounds as well as blessings. The story ends with a final glimpse of her mother among the other residents of her senior citizen's complex, a picture that contains a clear note of admiration.

This almost-admiring view of the mother as crotchety old lady is expanded in "Sunday Morning, June 4, 1989." Here the main character is middle-aged divorcée Pauline. Pauline and her brother refer to "their difficult mother" as "The Ayatollah" and "The One True Cross." The mother is now ninety-two with a "long history of...aberrations"; Pauline and her brother have diagnosed her problem as "a post-partum depression from which she never recovered" (*Wild Blue Yonder*

190). Pauline's Sunday morning phone call to her mother is laden with the small frustrations and misunderstandings of adult mother-daughter relationships. Pauline's mother asks if Pauline has had a medical check up recently because she seemed not to be her "usual self"; Pauline silently wonders, "How the hell would she know what was her, Pauline's 'usual self'?" (193). As in other Thomas stories, the mother's letters, full of "accusation or grievance" (194) are recalled as life-long irritants. Yet despite the annoyances, Pauline has obviously achieved a certain amount of acceptance of her mother, enough to recognize that, no matter how much she might like to, "she could no more walk away from her mother than she could walk away from the woman in the mirror" (196). The awareness that her mother is a part of herself allows her to feel "a great rush of affection for her mother, this tiny, scrappy, dreadful woman who had, after all, given her the gift of life." She recognizes that her mother "would never be happy and she would no doubt go to her grave...thinking life had somehow given her the short end of the stick" (200), yet Pauline is able to feel a genuine sympathy for her self-pitying mother.

Two stories compete for the reader's, and Pauline's, attention throughout "Sunday Morning." Pauline's conversation with her mother takes place against the backdrop of that morning's news, which includes "the killings in Tiananmen Square and the death of the real Ayatollah, Khomeini" (192).

Pauline's ironic contrast between her mother's petty worries and the vast human misery in China and Iran increases her anger at her mother, but this is balanced by her recognition that "her mother's personal misery was what was real to her" (199).

As Pauline listens to the sound on the radio of Iranian women mourning Khomeini's death, she wonders, "What had the Ayatollah done for these women?" (197). Why should they mourn a man whose leadership had apparently brought them nothing but oppression? Pauline's identification of her mother as "the Ayatollah" makes it easy for the reader to ask the corresponding question: why would Pauline mourn her mother's death? Why does she maintain any connection at all with a woman who has oppressed her all her life? No reason is given; Pauline is simply aware that her connection to her mother is as irrevocably a fact of life as is the tension between them and that both will continue until the mother's death--a loss Pauline will certainly mourn.

This is as close as we are likely to come to a mother-daughter reconciliation in Thomas' work. Pauline comes to terms with the mother-daughter relationship for herself, for Alice, for Rachel and Isobel and Audrey Thomas, in the best way she can: with an awareness and acceptance of blessings as well as wounds. This reading adds significance to the baby shoes Alice shares with Flora at the end of *Intertidal Life*.

The autobiographical daughter/mother of Audrey Thomas' fictions triumphs by choosing what mythology, what songs and stories, she will accept from her mother and what she will pass on to her daughter. In doing so, she confirms the bond between generations of women and the songs they teach each other.

CONCLUSION

This survey of Audrey Thomas' fictions concludes with women reaching back to their mothers and ahead to their daughters, creating stories that give meaning to these relationships. The heroines of this last chapter seem far removed from the fragmented and fragile woman bleeding her way through a meaningless parody of birth in "If One Green Bottle...." and *Mrs. Blood*. Yet the same concerns dominate the lives of all these women, of all Thomas' characters, because, as we have seen, they are not different women with different stories, but variations on a theme, characters constructed by Thomas to explore the process through which one woman, Audrey Thomas, turns experience into language.

The trauma of unsuccessful maternity makes an appropriate starting point for this exploration because it is a painful, difficult process which fails to produce the expected result. Instead of the child, what is produced is a woman's story of her experience, her "maculate delivery," her attempt to put into story an event for which her language has no words. The patron saint of Thomas' stories is her Bloody Mary, who, unlike the Virgin Mary of Christian mythology, shares and affirms women's bloody and painful experience.

In Thomas' works of the late 1970s and early 1980s, her subject matter again reflects her autobiographical experience as a single mother and writer. The story she tells and

retells in many of these fictions is that of a woman trying to define herself, exploring the multiple meanings of the words that are used to define her. These women attempt to write themselves into story, to guarantee that they will not be erased from some male-centred story, as Rachel in *Latakia* fears she will disappear from Michael's autobiography. Like Rachel, they respond to this fear by telling their own stories which centre on their own female experience.

Many of Thomas' stories focus on a relationship often excluded from a male-centred literature--the uniquely female relationship of mother and daughter. As with the female experience of giving birth, this is a story which women have to tell themselves. Thomas' attempt to tell it reaches back to her relationship with her own mother, described in fictional form as Clara Cleary in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. In this novel, and in references to the heroine's mother in other Thomas stories, we see a frustrated 1940s housewife driven to excesses of rage by the discrepancy between her own life and the popular image of what a woman's life ought to be within that patriarchal society. This mother also tells her own story, but the heritage of "songs" she passes on to her daughter is mostly concerned with bitterness and resentment. Thomas explores many possible outcomes for this woman's daughter, a daughter whom we are encouraged to identify with Thomas herself. The most negative is that of Isobel Cleary

Carpenter, who is eventually driven to madness. *Intertidal Life* and several later short stories show a woman who has used her mother's heritage more positively, expressing herself as a writer, and concerned about what stories her own daughters will inherit from her. This character is able to look back and see the strength of her own mother, and to accept the ambiguities inherent in the mother/daughter relationship.

Thus, by deliberately using autobiographical material and repetition, Audrey Thomas repeatedly draws our attention to the process of storytelling, the process by which women write themselves into language. With "tools as worn as words," they define themselves and shape the world their daughters will inherit.

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