

Motherhood in *Le Torrent*

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This essay explores the idea of a cruel expression of motherhood in *Le Torrent*. I intend to delve into the character of Claudine Perreault, and explore the methods she used to abuse her son, as well as the reasoning and consequences of that abuse. Claudine plays the dominant parental role in the life of her son because she is his only parent. Through her mistreatment of her son, Claudine hinders his growth and maturation while molding him with her actions and expectations. Claudine is physically and emotionally abusive, thus hindering her son's physical and mental growth as well as his emotional development. She utilizes emotionally abusive techniques such as isolation and religious guilt to force her own ideas onto her son. These two ideas play a large role in her own life, so Claudine also subjects her son to them. Claudine robs François of his childhood through her strict and severe treatment and constant threat of violence. This deprivation fuels François's disdain for his mother. *Le Torrent* culminates in Claudine deafening her son, thus inhibiting his ability to join the seminary- the only job she had ever wanted for him. By examining this work- specifically Claudine's choices and the ideas that she has forced upon her son- I intend to explore an expression of imperfect motherhood that strays from the normal depictions. I am also trying to illustrate the transformation within Quebecois and women's literature

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that *Le Torrent* brought about with its unconventional depiction of motherhood.

Beginning *Le Torrent*, one can see Claudine's maternal influence on François almost immediately. Moving past Claudine's physical abuse of François, I would first like to talk about Claudine's mental and emotional abuse of François. Claudine abuses François emotionally through the utilization of estrangement and neglect. Her lack of maternal support creates a dark conflict within François that culminates in his indifference to - and possible culpability in- the death of his mother when she is trampled by a horse named Perceval. From the beginning of *Le Torrent*, one can see the isolation of François. The opening line of the novel illustrates this: "J'étais un enfant dépossédé du monde" (Hébert, 9). François had no world to live in outside of his miserable existence on the farm with his mother. He was deprived of a normal, productive childhood. This deprivation fueled François's desire for freedom from his mother. François faced a childhood of abuse and misery at the hands of Claudine. François further proves that his misery stems from his childhood, and therefore his mother, when he says "Je n'ai pas eu d'enfance" (Hébert, 9). Claudine has deprived her son of his childhood through her abuse and neglect. François grows up in a home defined by terms such as "chatiment, justice de Dieu, damnation, enfer, discipline, [and] peche originel" (Hébert, 10). Claudine utilizes religion to create a system of consequences to threaten her son with, while also justifying her execution of said punishments. The psychological abuse that Claudine inflicts upon François manifests within him as guilt, fear, and a feeling of entrapment. Claudine constructs a world for François that is full of severe consequences, rules, and demands.

Claudine Perreault employs violence against her son, François, to punish him while also creating a fear of her abuse within him. Thus, for years, François is too afraid to stand up to his mother. Although François is eventually able to find freedom from his mother, one must

not forget that this only happens after Claudine has deafened him and therefore made it impossible for him to become a priest as she intended. First and foremost, "François est à la fois spectateur et victime de la violence maternelle" (de Vaucher Gravilli, 86).

When reading *Le Torrent* and learning of Claudine Perreault's abuse of her son, it is understandable to question her motives. What has caused this mother to develop such a hatred towards her son? Hébert reveals that Claudine takes her own issues out on François because she has suffered the indignity of a pregnancy out of wedlock. After she became pregnant, Claudine was exiled from her home and now lives in estrangement, in the wilderness on a farm alone with her son. Thus, she is isolated and forced to see the product of her indiscretion day in and day out. She transfers these feelings of estrangement and isolation onto her son, thus treating him as an outlet for her own misery. Hewitt's essay on the theme of estrangement in Hébert's work summarizes this as: "Emotional conflict, psychological stress, and physical abuse are aspects of these personal relationships. The estrangement is manifested most frequently by a repressive hostility which widens the gap of separation" (Hewitt, 6). Claudine Perreault embodies this statement perfectly. Her abusive repression of François creates their interpersonal estrangement and prefaces the isolation they both respectively feel. This hostility presents itself through "verbal savagery, physical cruelty and/or death" (Hewitt, 7). All three of these phenomena can be seen in *Le Torrent* in the relationship between Claudine and François.

As a result of his upbringing, François grows to resent his mother. Thus he decides to abandon her and rebels against her. François "illustrent ce refus d'identification à la mère et la haine de ce qu'elle représente" (Mauguière, 636). However, the audience remains sympathetic with François because of the mistreatment he has received at the hands of Claudine as a child and the repulsion one feels towards her because of this. Thus, Judith Gardiner's statement that "the most

disturbing villain in recent women's fiction is not the selfish or oppressive male, but, instead, the bad mother" is justified (Gardiner, cited in Mauguière, 636). Claudine Perreault is truly a villain for not only her mistreatment of her son, but also her selfish reasoning for this mistreatment. Claudine, after having been shamed for being a single mother who was impregnated out of wedlock, decides that the only way for her to redeem herself is to raise her son to join the seminary. She believes that she can aggressively lead her son to the priesthood through violence, repression, and fear mongering. Claudine treats François as if his existence is innately sinful because of the circumstances of his conception and her own estrangement and isolation from society. Hébert describes her rage with a metaphor for her eyes: "Ses yeux lançaient des flammes" (Hébert, 16). When François rebels against her plan, Claudine loses her temper. Hébert writes of the scene where Claudine loses her temper, hits, and causes the deafness of François, " Son visage était tout défait, presque hideux. Je me dis que c'est probablement ainsi que la haine et la mort me défigureraient, un jour. (...) Elle le brandissait de haut. (...) Ma mere me frappa plusieurs fois à la tête" (Hébert, 22). After this fight, François says "Ma tête est silence" (Hébert, 29) in reference to his new deafness. It is in this moment that we see Claudine unleash her hatred for her son in a morally repugnant way: "ce qui frappe, c'est la détermination, et la rapidité avec laquelle elle veut porter son coup, dans une sorte de férocité inexorable" (Gravili, 86). In *Le Torrent*, Hébert describes the aggression of Claudine in this moment using a simile: "ma mère bondit comme une tigresse" (Hébert, 22). She attacks her son with the aggression of a tigress, revealing her personal comfort with violence and hatred for her son.

As she was violent in life, so too must Claudine Perreault face violence in death. In the end, Claudine's death is officially ruled an accident, but the circumstances surrounding her death are suspicious.

She is trampled by one of the family horses, Perceval. François has admired this horse for years because of his stubbornness and unwillingness to submit to Claudine's will. François took inspiration from the spirit of the horse as a teenager, which led him to his decision to defy his mother's wishes when he was seventeen. While François himself did not kill his mother, he also did not try to stop Perceval from trampling her. Undoubtedly, "beaucoup plus complexe est la situation du matricide [...] c'est un crime sanctionné par toutes les lois humaines et divines, un tabou de toutes les civilisations" (Gravili, 88). Claudine's death- especially the violence surrounding it- seems like a just punishment for her years of abusing her son. Examining the manner in which Claudine died- being trampled by Perceval- allows the reader to acknowledge deeper symbols within *Le Torrent*. Specifically, "le cheval, on le sait, est une symbole déjà présente dans *l'Apocalypse* dont Anne Hébert était une fervente lectrice, il métaphorise sans aucun doute la force de l'instinct et du désir de libération de l'univers parental" (Gravili, 88). The horse serves as a symbol of liberation. Thus, Claudine is finally killed by the liberation of her son. Her power comes from her exertion of control, thus when she can no longer control her son, she is powerless and weak.

The publication of *Le Torrent* marks an important shift in francophone literature that occurred during the 1950's and 1960's. In Quebecois literature specifically, "women writers began to create mother characters which did not correspond to the social stereotypes" (Forsyth, 45). This newfound freedom allowed women writers to craft maternal characters that did not adhere to traditional values of nurturing and empathy for their children. Thus, villainous mothers such as *Le Torrent's* Claudine Perreault emerged. No longer forced to create static, stereotypical mothers, women writers could explore different maternal archetypes and the true depths of the feminine psyche, even those depths which proved darker and more malevolent. This new

wave of complex female characters- specifically mothers- “revealed the devastating effect the mother could have on a male child” (Forsyth, 45-46). François and Claudine provide an intense case study of this phenomenon, as they embody the strained mother-son relationship that became prevalent in literature at the time. Claudine cannot offer François a nurturing upbringing because of her personal issues and shortcomings; rather, “the only heritage [Claudine] can offer [her son] is violence, suffering, solitude, and debilitating guilt” (Forsyth, 46). As readers, we see these thèmes as they play out in the lives of François and Claudine. Indeed “the [Quebecois women] writers of the 1960s succeeded in conveying the reality of the mother’s condition” (Forsyth, 46). Writers such as Anne Hébert “strongly rejected the mother’s role, but did not succeed in going beyond the stark reality of what is” (Forsyth, 46). Hébert focused on the horrors of a cruel mother, and how this impacted the reality that her son François experiences. Many writers of this time period focused on, and thus changed the perspective on, the mother-daughter relationship, but the mother-son relationship faces a similar treatment in Quebecois literature during this time. However, the most apparent consequence of this movement was the transformation of the idea of the figure of the mother. In Quebecois literature, “mothers in recent Quebec writing are no longer seen as beings who care for others. [...] Still there is no example in recent Quebec literature of a woman writer who has been able to affirm and authentic and strong relationship with her own mother. Without exception, the memory of constraint, pain, and denial made total separation from the tradition inevitable.” (Forsyth, 49).

In conclusion, it is undeniable that mothers are influential figures in the lives of their children. In any form, the mother undoubtedly has a major impact on her children, for better or worse. As seen with François’s mother Claudine in *Le Torrent*, sometimes mothers decide to intentionally inhibit their children’s growth and development, through

physically, emotionally, and mentally abusive actions. The archetypal abusive mother employs alienation, violence, cruelty, and repression to subdue her children. However, perhaps most odiously, abusive mothers such as Claudine are, at their core, selfish and uncaring. Claudine proves to be a villainous mother because she imposes her own desires onto her son. Rather than caring about what he wants, she treats him as a boon for her salvation from her own “sins” of premarital sex and single motherhood. When her son rebels against her plan, she sees this as a personal offense and a threat to her salvation. Her need for control over her son negatively influences her own actions while also negatively influencing his psyche and physical health. Indubitably, Claudine Perreault strays far from the image of the ideal mother, so much so that she proves to be a truly villainous mother in her selfish cruelty towards her son François.

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