Images of **Women** in American Popular Culture

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COMMON WOMEN

Philip Wylie

Philip Wylie (1902-1971), born in Beverly, Massachusetts, was the son of a writer and a Presbyterian minister. After three years at Princeton, he became a staff writer for The New Yorker. The prolific author of novels, short stories, screen plays, and social commentaries, he is chiefly remembered today as the man who coined the term “Momism.”

“Common Women” was the most controversial chapter in the most controversial book of 1942, Generation of Vipers. In iconoclastic style, Wylie swept the first of the mythical American triumvirate—motherhood, the flag, and apple pie—off its pedestal. In another chapter, “A Specimen American Myth,” he inveighed against the contemporary distortion of the story of Cinderella. Originally designed to indicate that virtue can be found in the most humble trappings, the tale had come to mean that women were destined to find handsome and affluent Prince Charmings. Wylie maintains that this myth is related to the idea that the experience of childbearing entitled women to be released from other responsibilities, “... in spite of the fact that modern medical practice is able to turn most childbearing into no more of a hardship than, say, a few months of benign tumor plus a couple of hours in a dental chair.”

MOM IS THE END PRODUCT OF SHE

She is Cinderella, the creature I discussed earlier, the shining-haired, the starry-eyed, the ruby-lipped virgo aeternis, of which there is presumably one, and only one, or a one-and-only for each male, whose dream is fixed upon her deflowerment and subsequent perpetual possession. This act is a sacrament in all churches and a civil affair in our society. The collective aspects of marriage are thus largely compressed into the rituals and social perquisites of one day. Unless some element of mayhem or intention of divorce subsequently obtrudes, a sort of privacy engulfs the union and all further developments are deemed to be the business of each separate pair, including the transition of Cinderella into mom, which, if it occasions any shock, only adds to the huge, invisible burthen every man carries with him into eternity. It is the weight of this bundle which, incidentally, squeezes out of him the wish for death, his last positive biological resource.

Mom is an American creation. Her elaboration was necessary because she was launched as Cinderella. Past generations of men have accorded to their mothers, as a rule, only such honors as they earned by meritorious action in their individual daily lives. Filial duty was recognized by many sorts of civilizations and loyalty to it has been highly regarded among most peoples. But I cannot think, offhand, of any civilization except ours in which an entire division of living men has been used, during wartime, or at any time, to spell out the word “mom” on a drill field, or to perform any equivalent act.

The adoration of motherhood has even been made the basis of a religious cult, but the mother so worshipped achieved maternity without change in her

virgin status—a distinction worthy of contemplation in itself—and she thus no way resembled mom.

Hitherto, in fact, man has shown a considerable qui vive to the dangers which arise from momism and freely perceived that his “old wives” were oft vixens, dragons, and Xanthippos. Classical literature makes a constant point it. Shakespeare dwelt on it. Man has also kept before his mind an awareness that, even in the most lambent mother love, there is always a chance son extraneous current will blow up a change, and the thing will become consuming furnace. The spectacle of the female devouring her young in the firm belief that it is for their own good is too old in man’s legends to be overlooked by any but the most flimsily constructed society.

Freud has made a fierce and a wondrous catalogue of examples of mother love-in-action which traces its origin to an incestuous perversion of a norm instinct. That description is, of course, sound. Unfortunately, Americans, who are the most prissy people on earth, have been unable to benefit from Freud wisdom because they can prove that they do not, by and large, sleep with their mothers. That is their interpretation of Freud. Moreover, no matter how man times they repeat the Scriptures, they cannot get the true sense of the passage about lusting in one’s heart—especially when they are mothers thinking about their sons, or vice versa.

Meanwhile, megaloid momworship has got completely out of hand. Our land, subjectively mapped, would have more silver cords and apron string crisscrossing it than railroads and telephone wires. Mom is everywhere and everything and damned near everybody, and from her depends all the rest of the U.S. Disguised as good old mom, dear old mom, sweet old mom, you loving mom, and so on, she is the bride at every funeral and the corpse at every wedding. Men live for her and die for her, dote upon her and whisper her name as they pass away, and I believe she has now achieved, in the hierarchy of miscellaneous articles, a spot next to the Bible and the Flag, being reckoned part of both in a way. She may therefore soon be granted by the House of Representatives the especial supreme and extraordinary right of sitting on top of both when she chooses, which, God knows, she does. At any rate, if no such bill is under consideration, the presentation of one would cause little debate among the solons. These sages take cracks at their native land and make jokes about Holy Writ, but nobody among them—no great man or brave—from the first day of the first congressional meeting to the present ever stood in our halls of state and pronounced the one indubitably most-needed American verity: “Gentlemen, mom is a jerk.”

Mom is something new in the world of men. Hitherto, mom has been so busy raising a large family, keeping house, doing the chores, and fabricating everything in every home except the floor and the walls that she was rarely a problem to her family or to her equally busy friends, and never one to herself. Usually, until very recently, mom folded up and died of hard work somewhere in the middle of her life. Old ladies were scarce and those who managed to get old did so by making remarkable inner adjustments and by virtue of a fabulous horniness of body, so that they lent to old age not only dignity but metal.

Nowadays, with nothing to do, and all the tens of thousands of men I wrote about in a preceding chapter to maintain her, every clattering pravkimet in the republic survives for an incredible number of years, to stamp and jibber in
species, excepting only to note that perhaps, having a creative physical part in the universe, she falls more easily than man into the contraposite role of spiritual sabboteur.

Mom got herself out of the nursery and the kitchen. She then got out of the house. She did not get out of the church, but, instead, got the stern stuff out of it, padded the guild room, and moved in more solidly than ever before. No longer either hesitant or reverent, because there was no cause for either attitude after her purge, she swung the church by the tail as she swung everything else. In a preliminary test of strength, she also got herself the vote and, although politics never interested her (unless she was exceptionally naive, a hairy foghorn, or a size forty scorpion), the damage she forthwith did to society was so enormous and so rapid that even the best men lost track of things. Mom's first gracious presence at the ballot-box was roughly concomitant with the start toward a new all-time low in political scurrility, hoodlumism, gangsterism, labor strife, monopolistic thuggery, moral degeneration, civic corruption, smuggling, bribery, theft, murder, homosexuality, drunkenness, financial depression, chaos and war. Note that.

The degenerating era, however, marked new highs in the production of junk. Note that, also.

Mom, however, is a great little guy. Pulling pants onto her by these words, let us look at mom.

She is a middle-aged puffin with an eye like a hawk that has just seen a rabbit twitch far below. She is about twenty-five pounds overweight, with no sprint, but sharp heels and a hard backhand which she does not regard as a fault but a womanly defense. In a thousand of her there is not sex appeal enough to budge a hermit ten paces off a rock ledge. She none the less spends several hundred dollars a year on permanent and transformations, pomades, cleansers, rouges, lipsticks, and the like—and fools nobody except herself. If a man kisses her with any earnestness, it is time for mom to feel for her pocketbook, and this occasionally does happen.

She smokes thirty cigarettes a day, chews gum, and consumes tons of bonbons and petits fours. The shortening in the latter, stripped from pigs, sheep and cattle, shortens mom. She plays bridge with the stupid voracity of a hammerhead shark, which cannot see what it is trying to gobble but never stops snapping its jaws and roiling the waves with its tail. She drinks moderately, which is to say, two or three cocktails before dinner every night and a brandy and a couple of highballs afterward. She doesn't count the two cocktails she takes before lunch when she lunches out, which is every day she can. On Saturday nights, at the club or in the juke joint, she loses count of her drinks and is liable to get a little tiddily, which is to say, shot or blind. But it is her man who worries about where to acquire the money while she worries only about how to spend it, so he has the ulcers and colitis and she has the guts of a bear; she can get pretty stiff before she topples.

Her sports are all spectator sports.

She was graduated from high school or a "finishing" school or even a college in her distant past and made up for the unhappiness of compulsory education by sloughing all that she learned so completely that she could not pass the final examinations of a fifth grader. She reads the fiction in three women's magazines each month and occasionally skims through an article, which usually
angers her so that she gets other moms to skim through it, and then they have a session on the subject over a canister of spiked coffee in order to damn the magazine, the editors, the author, and the silly girls who run about these days. She reads two or three motion-picture fan magazines, also, and goes to the movies about two nights a week. If a picture does not coincide precisely with her attitude of the moment, she converses through all of it and so whiles away the time. She does not appear to be lecherous toward the moving photographs as men do, but that is because she is a realist and a little shy on imagination. However, if she gets to Hollywood and encounters the flesh-and-blood article known as a male star, she and her sister moms will run forward in a mob, wearing a joint expression that must make God rue his invention of bisexuality, and tear the man’s clothes from his body, yea, verily, down to his B.V.D.’s.

Mom is organization-minded. Organizations, she has happily discovered, are intimidating to all men, not just to mere men. They frighten politicians to sniveling servility and they terrorize pastors; they bother bank presidents and they pulverize school boards. Mom has many such organizations, the real purpose of which is to compel an abject compliance of her environs to her personal desires. With these associations and committees she has double parking ignored, for example. With them she drives out of the town and the state, if possible, all young harlots and all proprietors of places where “questionable” young women (though why they are called that—being of all women the least in question) could possibly forage, not because she competes with such creatures but because she contrasts so unfavorably with them. With her clubs (a solid term!) she causes bus lines to run where they are convenient for her rather than for workers, plants flowers in sordid spots that would do better with sanitation, snaps independent men out of office and replaces them with clammy castrates, throws prodigious fairs and parties for charity and gives the proceeds, usually about eight dollars, to the janitor to buy the committee some beer for its headache on the morning after, and builds clubhouses for the entertainment of soldiers where she succeeds in persuading thousands of them that they are momsick and would rather talk to her than take Betty into the shrubs. All this, of course, is considered social service, charity, care of the poor, civic reform, patriotism and self-sacrifice.

As an interesting sidelight, clubs afford mom an infinite opportunity for nosing into other people’s business. Nosing is not a mere psychological ornament of her; it is a basic necessity. Only by nosing can she uncover all incipient revolutions against her dominion and so warn and assemble her co-cannibals.

Knowing nothing about medicine, art, science, religion, law, sanitation, civics, hygiene, psychology, morals, history, geography, poetry, literature, or any other topic except the all-consuming one of momism, she seldom has any especial interest in what, exactly, she is doing as a member of any of these endless organizations, so long as it is something.

I, who grew up as a “motherless” minister’s son and hence was smothered in multimomism for a decade and a half, had an unusual opportunity to observe the phenomenon at zero range. Also, as a man stirring about the cesspool of my society, I have been foolhardy enough to try, on occasion, to steer moms into useful work. For example, owing to the fact that there was no pasteurization law in Miami and hundreds of people were flecking the pavement with tubercular sputum, while scores, including my own wife, lay sick and miserable with undulant fever, I got a gaggle of these creatures behind a move toward a pasteurization law, only to find, within a few weeks, that there was a large, alarmed, and earnest committee at work in my wake to prevent passage of any such law. This falange, fanned by the milk dealers, who wo not even deliver the stuff if they could get their money without, had underr even that one small crusade because it had uncovered a quack doctor, known and unheard-of, who had printed the incandescent notion that cans the big boogie of the moms, was caused by the pasteurization of milk!

In the paragraph above I have given, I know, the golden tip for which a mom able to read this volume have been searching all the long way. I had mother: therefore, all my bitterness and—especially—this cruel and want attack of moms for which, they will doubtless think, I should be shot or lock up. Well, let them make the most of that. All mothers are not such a raven purulence as they, and mine was not. Mine, I can show, felt much as I do above the thundering third sex, as do all good women, of whom there are still a few. But I have researched the moms, to the beady brains behind their beady ey and to the stones in the center of their fat hearts. I am immune to the devotion because I have already had enough. Learning the hard way, I hav found out that it is that same devotion which, at the altar, splits the lamb fro his nave to his chaps. And none of the moms, at least, will believe that I am lamb. Let them mark time on that.

In churches, the true purpose of organized momhood is to unseat bishop snatch the flocks off prelates, change rectors just for variety, cross-jet com munity gossip, take the customary organizational kudos out of the pot each fc each, bestow and receive titles, and short-circuit one another.

Mom also has patriotism. If a war comes, this may even turn into a genuine feeling and the departure of her son may be her means to grace in old age. Often, however, the going of her son is only an occasion for more show. She has, in that case, no deep respect for him. What he has permitted her to do to him has rendered him unworthy of consideration—and she has shown him none since puberty. She does not miss him—only his varlet—by over that she can weep interminably. I have seen the unmistakable evidence in a blue star mom of envy of a gold star mom; and I have a firsthand account by a woman of unimpeachable integrity, of the doings of a shipload of these supermommen—of the gold star, en route at government expense to France to visit the graves of their sons, which I forbear to set down here, because it is a document of such naked awfulness that, by publishing it, I would be inciting to riot, and the printed thing might even rouse the death soldiers and set them tramping like the Dunsany’s idol all the way from Flanders to hunt and haunt their archenemy progenitric—loved them—to death.

But, peace or war, the moms have another kind of patriotism that in the department of the human spirit, is identical to commercialized vice, because it captures a good thing and doles it out for the coin of unctuous pride—at the expense of deceased ancestors rather than young female offspring. By becoming a Daughter of this historic war or that, a woman makes herself into a sort of madam who fills the coffers of her ego with the prestige that has accrued to the doings of others. A frantic emptiness of those coffers provides the impulse for the act. There are, of course, other means of filling them, but they are difficult, and mom never does anything that is difficult—either the moving of a piano or the breaking of a nasty habit.

Some legionnaires accept, in a similar way, accolade due their associates
only. But legionnaires learned a little wisdom, since they still can function in ways that have some resemblance to normality. Furthermore, competition with the legionaries from the new war will probably make veritable sages out of thousands.

But mom never meets competition. Like Hitler, she betrays the people who would give her a battle before she brings up her troops. Her whole personal life, so far as outward expression is concerned, is, in consequence, a mopping-up action. Traitors are shot, yellow stars are slapped on those beneath notice, the good-looking men and boys are rounded up and beaten or sucked into pliability, a new slave population continually goes to work at making more munitions for Mormonism, and mom herself sticks up her head, or maybe the periscope of the woman next door, to find some new region that needs taking over. This technique pervades all she does.

In the matter of her affiliation of herself with the Daughters of some war the Hitler analogue especially holds, because these sororities of the sword often constitute her Party—her shirtism. Ancestor worship, like all other forms of religion, contained an instinctual reason and developed rituals thought to be germane to the reason. People sedulously followed those rituals, which were basically intended to remind them that they, too, were going to be ancestors someday and would have to labor for personal merit in order to be worthy of veneration. But mom’s reverence for her bold forebears lacks even a ritualistic significance, and so instructs her in nothing. She is peremptory about historical truth, mandates, custom, fact, and point. She brushes aside the ideals and concepts for which her forebears perished fighting, as if they were the crumbs of melba toast. Instead, she attributes to the noble dead her own immediate and selfish attitudes. She “knows full well what they would have thought and done,” and in that whole-cloth trumpery she goes busting on her way.

Thus, the long-vanished warriors who liberated this land from one George in order to make another its first president guide mom divinely as she barges along the badgering boulevard of her life, relaying flak from the grave on birth control, rayon, vitamins, the power trust, and a hundred other items of which the dead had no knowledge. To some degree most people, these days, are guilty of this absurd procedure. There has been more nonsense printed lately detailing what Jefferson would say about matters he never dreamed of than a sensible man can endure. (I do not have any idea, for instance, and I am sure nobody has any idea, what Jefferson would think about the giddy bungle of interstate truck commerce; but people, columnists especially, will tell you.)

Mom, however, does not merely quote Thomas Jefferson on modern topics: she is Thomas Jefferson. This removes her twice from sanity. Mom wraps herself in the mantle of every canny man and coward who has drilled with a musket on this continent and reproduced a line that zigzagged down to mom. In that cloak, together with the other miters, rings, scepters, and power symbols which she has swept, she has become the American pope.

People are feebly aware of this situation and it has been pointed out at one time or another that the phrase “Mother knows best” has practically worn out the staircase to private hell. Most decriers of matriarchy, however, are men of middle age, like me.

Young men whose natures are attuned to a female image with more feelings than mom possesses and different purposes from those of our synthetic archetype of Cinderella-the-go-getter bounce anxiously away from their first few brutal contacts with modern young women, frightened to find their shining hair is vulcanized, their agate eyes are embedded in cement, and their ruby lips caschardened into pliers for the bending males like wire. These young men, fresh-startled by learning that She is a chrome-plated areeft, but not able to discern that the condition is mom’s unconscious preparation of somebody’s sister for a place in the gynecocracy—are, again, presented with a soft and shimmering resting place, the bosom of mom.

Perseus was carefully not told that the Gorgons had blonde back hair and faces on the other side, like Janus, which, instead of turning him to stone, would have produced orgasms in him. Thus informed he would have failed to slay Medusa and bring back her head. He might have been congealed—but he might not. Our young men are screened from a knowledge of this duality also, but they are told only about the blonde side. When they glimpse the other, and find their blood running cold and their limbs becoming like concrete, they carom off, instanter, to mom. Consequently, no Gorgons are ever clearly seen, let alone slain, in our society. Mom dishes out her sweetness to all fugitives, and it turns them not to stone, but to slime.

“Her boy,” having been “protected” by her love, and carefully, even shudderingly, shielded from his logical development through his barbaric period, or childhood (so that he has either to become a barbarian as a man or else to spend most of his energy denying the barbarism that howls in his brain—an autonomous remnant of the youth he was forbidden), is cushioned against any major step in his progress toward maturity. Mom steals from the generation of women behind her (which she has, as a still further defense, also sterilized of integrity and courage) that part of her boy’s personality which should have become the love of a female contemporary. Mom transmutes it into sentimentality for herself.

The process has given rise to the mother-problem, and the mother-in-law problem, and mom has occasionally been caught tipping the bat, but she has contrived even then to make the thing an American joke in order to hide what it really is—as invidious a spiritual parasitism as any in the book. With her captive son or sons in a state of automatic adoration of herself (and just enough dubiety of their wives to keep them limb or querulous at home), mom has ushered in the new form of American marriage: eternal ricolochet. The opposition of the sexes provides enough of that without mom’s doubling of the dose and loading of the dice, but mom does it—for mom. Her policy of protection, from the beginning, was not love of her boy but of herself, and as she found returns coming in from the disoriented young boy in smiles, pats, presents, praise, kisses, and all manner of childish representations of the real business, she moved on to possession.

Possession of the physical person of a man is slavery; possession of the spirit of a man is slavery also, because his body obeys his spirit and his spirit obeys its possessor. Mom’s boy will be allowed to have his psychobiological struggle with dad: to reach the day when he stands, emotionally, toe-to-toe with his father and wins the sluggish-out. That contest is as unavoidable as the ripening of an apple. It may last only a second—in which a young man says, “I will,” and an older man says, “You will not,” and the younger man does. And it is a struggle no youth can engage in, but only a youth who has reached full
manhood. But if it occurs prematurely, as under mom's ruinous aegis it usually does, it leads to more servitude for the boy. He is too young for independence.

Thus the sixteen-year-old who tells his indignant dad that he, not dad, is going to have the car that night and takes it—while mom looks on, dewy-eyed and anxious—has sold his soul to mom and made himself into a lifelong sucking-egg. His father, already well up the creek, loses in this process the stick with which he had been trying to paddle. It is here that mom has thrust her car into the very guts of man—and once it has made him think she is operating a gondola through the tunnels of love, and even believes it herself, she is actually taking tickets for the one-way ferry ride across the Styx.

As men grow older, they tend to become more like women, and vice versa. Even physically, their characteristics swap: men's voices rise, their breasts grow, and their chins recede; women develop bass voices and mustaches. This is another complementary, or opposite, turn of nature. It is meant to reconcile sexuality and provide a fountainhead of wisdom uncompromised by it, in the persons of those individuals who are hardy enough and lucky enough to survive to old age in a natural environment. But survival, as I have said, no longer depends on any sort of natural selection, excepting a great basic one which our brains are intended to deal with, and which, if allowed to go brazenly on, will have to reduce our species to savagery in order to get back to a level on which instinct itself can rule effectively.

The mealy look of men today is the result of memism and so is the pinched and baffled fury in the eyes of womankind. I said a while ago that I had been a motherless minister's son and implied that I had been mauled by every type of mom produced in this nation. I pointed out that the situation was one on which the moms would try to fix their pinches. I did not bother to prod at any misgivings they might feel about what the rude minister's boy, trained in snobbery by the example of the moms, might have found out about the matriarchy and its motivations through hanging around sewing clubrooms, hiding in heavy draperies, and holding up in choir lofts. Rather, I let any moms and adherents of momism who may be reading this slug along in the happy belief that, whether or not I knew it, they had got me off base.

Now, really.

Some of the doting ones, ready to write off all I have said if I will only make up and shove myself back into the groove for them, are now about to be clipped—but good. For, by a second contumelious revelation, I have caught onto all of middle-aged, middle-class, earth-owning Mrs. America that I happened to miss in the portieres. Hold your seats, ladies. I have been a clerk in a department store. Not merely that, but I have been a clerk behind the dress goods remnant counter. And not only that, but I have served and observed the matriarchy from the vantage point during sales. If there is a woman still on her feet and not laughing, nab her, because that will mark her as a ringleader in this horrid business.

Much of the psychological material which got me studying this matter of moms came into my possession as I watched the flower-hatted goddesses battle over fabric. I have seen the rich and the poor, the well-dressed and the shabby, the educated and the unlettered, tear into the stacked remnant day after day, shoving and harassing, trampling each other's feet, knocking hats, coiffures and glasses awry, cackling, screaming, bellowing, and giving the elbow, with-out any differential of behavior no matter how you sliced them. I have watched them deliberately drive quiet clerks out of their heads and their jobs and hear them whoop over the success of the stratagem. I have seen them cheat and steal and lie and rage and whip and harry and stampede—not just a few times but week after week, and not just a few women but thousands and thousands and thousands, from everywhere. I know the magnitude of their rationalizing ability down to the last pale tint and I know the blackguard rapturability of them down to the last pennyworth.

I have, as a matter of confidential fact, twice beheld the extraordinary spectacle occasioned by two different pairs of rich and world-famous women who managed, in the morass the moms make of the remnant counter by ten o'clock each morning, to get hold of opposite ends of the same three and a half yards of Liberty crepe or dotted swiss and who found out that the object under scrutiny was also being considered by another. This I hold to be the Supreme Evidence.

In both cases both women were "merely looking," but immediately they sensed possible antagonism for what might be a purchase (though the statistics ran about five thousand to one against that) they began to struggle with the state most insufferable to momism: competition.

First, perhaps, a lifting of a lorgnette; then a cold stare; next, a reproachful glance at the clerk, and a refined but snappy little jerk designed to yank free the far end of the goods. Riposte: a fierce clutch and a facial response in kind. Next, the buttery attempts—the so-called "social" smile—like a valentine laced around an ice pick, and a few words, "I beg your pardon—but I—er—I am looking at—this remnant." The wise clerk will now begin to search for the floorwalker and, in general, canvass his resources. (I should say, of course, that while I have seen only four renowned women engaged in this contremets I have seen dozens of less distinguished moms hit the same jackpot.) The upper-class rejoinder to the foregoing gambit is, of course, "I'm quite sorry, but I happened to notice that I selected this piece quite some time before you picked up the end of it." At this point a hard yank is, of course, optional. But usually there come two simultaneous jerks which loosen hair, knock both hats askew, and set the costume jewelry clattering. The women now start toward each other, down the remnant, hand over hand. Bystanders are buffeted. All dress goods that cover the rope of cloth are flung about. The dialogue takes a turn to "I'll have to ask you to be good enough to let go of my material!" It rises in register to a near-scream. Upper lips begin to sweat. Chests heave. Elbows swing up to the ready.

Both women are now yelling at once and the tonal quality is like the sound of fingernails drawn along slates. They punctuate their words with loud cries of "Manager!" and begin to jostle each other. Peripheral moms, punched by accident in the aggression, now take up with each other a contagion of brawls and bickerings. The principals, meanwhile, have met knuckle to knuckle in the middle of the fabric and are yowling in each other's faces. Toward this the floorwalker or section manager moves cautiously. The thing has an almost invariable denouement. One woman stalks out of the store and closes her account by mail, only to open it within a matter of days. The other triumphantly purchases the drugged cloth, charges it, signs for it, bears it away, and has the truck pick it up the following afternoon.
I have been a clerk. Clerks are wallpaper to mom, and it has never occurred to her that she needs to hide her spurring soul from them. Clerks see moms in the raw—with their husbands, sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, gigolos, and companion viragoes. That anybody such as I, an articulate man with a memory like a tombstone, should be standing behind a counter conducting an inadvertent espionage on the moms has never entered their brawling brains. But there I was—and I was there, too, in the church, and at the mausoleum. And I have hung around hospitals a lot—and insane asylums.

It can be pointed out—and has, indeed, been pointed out before, though not, so far as I know, by any chap who has had such diverse and intimate contacts with the moms as I—that they are taking over the male functions and interpreting those functions in female terms. When the mothers built up their pyramid of perquisite and required reverence in order to get at the checkbook, and so took over the schools (into which they have put gelding moms), churches, stores, and mass production (which included, of course, the railroads, boats, and airplanes and, through advertising, the radio and the magazines), they donned the breeches of Uncle Sam. To this inversion I shall refer again. Note it.

I have explained how the moms turned Cinderellaism to their advantage and I have explained that women possess some eighty percent of the nation’s money (the crystal form of its energy) and I need only allude, I think, to the statistical reviews which show that the women are the spenders, wherefore the controlling consumers of nearly all we make with our machines. The steel pudder in Pittsburgh may not think of himself as a feminine tool, but he is really only getting a Chevrolet ready for mom to drive through a garden wall. I should round out this picture of America existing for mom with one or two more details, such as annual increase in the depth of padding in vehicles over the past thirty years due to the fact that a fat rump is more easily irritated than a lean one, and the final essential detail of mom’s main subjective preoccupation, which is listening to the radio. The radio is mom’s soul; a detail, indeed.

It is also a book in itself, and one I would prefer to have my reader write after he has learned a little of the art of catching overtones as a trained ear, such as mine, catches them. But there must be a note on it.

The radio has made sentimentality the twentieth century Plymouth Rock. As a discipline, I have forced myself to sit a whole morning listening to the soap operas, along with twenty million moms who were busy sweeping dust under carpets while planning to drown their progeny in honey or bash in their heads. This filthy and indecent abomination, this trash with which, until lately, only moron servant girls could dull their cedulous minds in the tawdry privacy of their cubicles, is now the national saga. Team after team of feeble-mindedannies and Davides crawl from the loud-speaker into the front rooms of America. The characters are impossible, their adventures would make a saint sput, their morals are lower than those of ghouls, their habits are uncleanly, their humor is the substance that starts whole races grining bayonets, they have no manners, no sense, no goals, no worthy ambitions, no hope, no faith, no information, no values related to reality, and no estimate of truth. They merely sob and snicker—as they cheat each other.

Babies die every hour on the hour to jerk so many hundred gallons of tears. Cinderella kidnaps the Prince and then mortgages the palace to hire herself a gigolo. The most oafish cluck the radio executives can find, with a voice like a damp pillow—a mother-lover of the most degraded sort—is given to America as the ideal young husband. His wife, with a tin voice and a heart of corrosive him with a rival for as much time as is needed to titillate mom without scarifying the man's more critical duties. The radio is mom's final tool, for it stamps everybody who listens with the matriarchal brand—its superstitions, prejudices, devotional rules, taboos, and all other qualifications needful to its maintenance. Just as Goebbels in his nation, so our land is a living representation of the same fact worked out national death.

That alone is sinister enough, but the process is still more vicious, because it he has long ago yielded the dial-privilege to his female; so that a whole nation or its own problems. Any interior sign of worry, wonder, speculation, anxiety, annihilated by an electrical click whereby the populace puts itself in the place, has even to try to be itself alone in the presence of this real world.

This is Nirvana at last. It is also entropy. For here the spirit of man, absorbed, disoriented, confused, identified with ten thousand spurious persons. The radio, in very truth, sells soap. We could condition it to music, intelligent relatively. Rather than study herself and her environment with the necessary honesty, she's a responsibility in this mighty and tottering republic, she will bring it feudalism. Once, sentimentalism was piecemeal, or the price of a movie or expensive. I give you mom. I give you the destroying mother. I give you her justice—point to the sword in her hand. I give you death—the hundred million deaths. Fury. I give you Medusa and Stheno and the Fates, and you Proserpine, the Queen of Hell. The five-and-ten-cent-store Lilith, the designee at the bottom of your program the grand finale of all the soap pocketbooks when they waste the substance in them, and take back our new and braver world. We must drive roads to Rio and to Moscow and stop the manufacture of girdles: it is time that mom's and find out there, each for each, scientifically, about immortality and mira-
cles. To do such deeds, we will first have to make the conquest of momism, which grew up from male default.

Our society is too much an institution built to appease the rapacity of loving mothers. If that condition is an ineluctable experiment of nature, then we are the victims of a failure. But I do not think it is. Even while the regiments spell out “mom” on the parade grounds, I think mom’s grip can be broken by private integrity. Even though, indeed, it is the moms who have made this war.

For, when the young men come back from the war, what then will they feel concerning mom and her works?

EVERYDAY USE

Alice Walker

Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1944, attended Spelman College, and graduated from Sarah Lawrence College. During the 1960s, she worked on voter registration in Jackson, Mississippi. Her published works include five books of fiction, three books of poetry, a children’s biography of Langston Hughes, and an edition of the selected works of Zora Neale Hurston. In 1982, her novel The Color Purple won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Walker’s work illuminates the lives of ordinary people and underscores the importance of family life. “In the black family,” she says, “love, cohesion, support, and concern are crucial since the racist society constantly acts to destroy the black individual, the black family unit, the black child. In America, black people have only themselves and each other.”

In “Everyday Use,” which was included in the Best American Short Stories of 1973, Walker writes about a mother who must decide which of her daughters will have the family quilts: Dee, who wants the quilts to hang on her wall as evidence of her “heritage”; or Maggie, who would put the quilts to “everyday use.” The mother’s choice reflects her own values, as well as her sensitivity to both daughters, even though she must deny one.

I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and gay yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.

Maggie will be nervous until after her sister goes: she will stand hopelessly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs, eying her sister with a mixture of envy and awe. She thinks her sister has had life always in the palm of one hand, that “no” is a word the world never learned to say to her.

You’ve no doubt seen those TV shows where the child who has “made it” is confronted, as a surprise, by his own mother and father, tottering in weakly from backstage. (A pleasant surprise, of course: what would they do if parent and child came on the show only to curse out and insult each other?) On TV mother and child embrace and smile into each other’s faces. Sometimes the mother and father weep, the child wraps them in his arms and leans across the table to tell her how he would not have made it without their help. I have seen these programs.

Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought together on a TV program of this sort. Out of a dark and soft-seated limousine I am ushered into a bright room filled with many people. There I meet a smiling, gray, sporty man like Johnny Carson who makes my hand and tells me what a fine girl I have. Then we are on the stage and Dee is embracing me with tears in her eyes. She puts on my dress a large orchid, even though she has told me once that she thinks orchids are tacky flowers.

In real life I am a large big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercifully as a man. My fat keeps me hot in zero weather. I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming from the hog. One winter I knocked a bill calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledgehammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall. But of course all this does not show on television. I am the way my daughter would want me to be; a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue.

But that is a mistake. I know even before I wake up. Who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue? Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from them. Dee, though. She would always lock anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature.

“How do I look, Mama?” Maggie says, showing just enough of her thin body enveloped in pinafore and red blouse for me to know she’s there almost hidden by the door.

“Come out into the yard,” I say.

Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to someone who is ignorant enough to be kind to him? That is the way my Maggie walks. She has been like this, chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground.

Dee is lighter than Maggie, with nicier hair and a fuller figure. She’s a woman now, though sometimes I forget. How long ago was it that the other house burned? Ten, twelve years? Sometimes I can still hear the flames and feel Maggie’s arms sticking to me, her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little black paper flaps. Her eyes seemed stretched open, blazed open by the