

# “Death, Goodness, and the Lost Daughter: The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Carol Shields' *Unless*”

## Aara Suksi, Classical Studies



The archaic Greek *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Canadian Carol Shields' recent novel *Unless* share a story pattern: a mother loses her daughter to an inaccessible underworld; the mother laments and rages against the patriarchy responsible for her loss; eventually mother and daughter are reunited.

This research examines how a reading of *Unless*, conditioned by a familiarity with the traditional Greek myth, creates new meaning from the old story pattern.

In the Greek myth, the threat to the coming-of-age daughter, Persephone, is her violent initiation into marriage/death (see left). The mother-goddess' response is to withhold her agricultural fertility until her daughter is restored to her.

In *Unless*, the episode of patriarchal abduction has become the initiation of the daughter (Norah) into the studies in language and literature at university (represented by the marriage-narrative of *Madame Bovary*). In response, Reta Winter, the bereaved mother, herself a writer, realizes that her own novel must defy the traditional romance plot, which would end in the marriage of her protagonist, Alicia, to her fiancé, a man whose speaking name is Roman (the French word for 'novel').

In both narratives, the mother's resistance restores the daughter to life.

Susan Gubar: “The grievous separation of mother and maiden implies that in a patriarchal society women are divided from each other and from themselves”.<sup>1</sup> Gubar notes the repeated emphasis in these texts on the girl's sexual initiation: “Male domination in sexual relations becomes a synecdoche for a culture based on acquisition and brutality, a culture that covertly justifies (when it does not overtly celebrate) male mastery.” (305)

Shields' novel also emphasizes the daughter's sexual initiation, inviting a reading that fits into the tradition outlined by Gubar. At first, even Norah's mother adopts this reading (see excerpt, right). But then *Unless* goes on to reject this image of crisis and to refigure the moment of greatest danger for girls coming of age today and at risk of being seized from their mother's embrace and swallowed up by the underworld....

<sup>1</sup> "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth." *Women's Studies* 6 (1979): 301-15.

### Reta Misreads her Daughter

“I was suddenly alerted to something about her presence: the fact that her face looked oddly fallen. Her eyes were swollen, filled, though not with tears. What I glimpsed there was something hard, fixed, chitinous. What was it? ‘We are real only in our moments of recognition’—who said that? I was recognizing something now. I put on my *reading glasses* and looked at my daughter again, closely. I made her turn toward the window so that the light fell across her eyes and on her hard little upper lip. She blinked at last, then closed her eyes against the light and against me.  
‘Is it Ben?’” *Unless*, 127 (emphasis mine)

But it is not Ben, the boyfriend with whom Norah shares a basement apartment, who has taken her from the light and her mother.

### The ‘Moral Centre’ of the Narrative

Norah's French literature professor to her mother, Reta:

“Your daughter's view, and it is a perfectly viable view, was that *Madame Bovary* was forced to surrender her place as the *moral centre* of the novel. Others, needless to say, disagreed.” *Unless*, 217 (emphasis mine)

Reta's editor to Reta:

“I am talking about Roman being the *moral centre* of the book, and Alicia, for all her charms, is not capable of that role, surely you can see that. She writes fashion articles. She talks to her cat. She does yoga. She makes rice casseroles.” *Unless*, 285 (emphasis mine)

Norah begins her return home just when Reta refuses to comply with this prescription for her novel.

I sing of Demeter, awesome goddess, and her slender-ankled daughter Persephone whom Hades snatched away. She was given to him by all-seeing Zeus the loud-thunderer.

Apart from Demeter, Persephone was playing with the daughters of Ocean and gathering flowers in a soft meadow, roses and crocuses and beautiful violets, irises too and hyacinths and the narcissus which Earth made to grow at the will of Zeus and to please Hades, to be a snare for the bloom-like girl—a marvellous, radiant flower. ...

And the girl was amazed and reached out with both hands to take the lovely toy; but the wide-pathed earth yawned there in the plain of Nysa, and the lord Hades with his immortal horses sprang out upon her.

*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 1-18

