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 romantic 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.” 1

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 covertsly 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….