The Universal Mother Metaphor in Tremblay’s *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again*

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Although reviewers of Tremblay’s *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* (1998) focus on the monologues of the angry mother who rants about everyday concerns for the well-being of her child, a character much like the one who initiated Tremblay’s career (the old song), the author wishes to focus on how the narrator’s memory of his mother stage by stage in his life enacted before our eyes, permits Tremblay to self-consciously explain that his artistry reaches far beyond bringing the people he knew best in his youth, who had no knowledge of theater history, acting, and directing and staging, to the stage. His growth as an artist and his “new songs” are a result of his own continuous development of that knowledge.

*Keywords:* autobiographical narrator, religious deification of mothers, daydreaming, imagination, sentimental novel, science fiction

**Introduction**

From Michael Tremblay’s earliest plays as *Les Belles Soeurs (The Sisters-in-Law)* (1998), critics have indicated that Tremblay studies those people and situations he knew best in his youth: the francophone working class milieu of Montreal. As Michael Cardy once noted, Tremblay’s early plays are filled with angry characters. Because their form or anger could lead to apathy and a fruitless railing against fate, to vindictive and spiteful treatment of other people, and to suicide and murder, their anger must be viewed with sympathy. Although the characters are not admirable in themselves because they cannot dispel marginalization and alienation, they must channel the negative and deadly forms of anger so that they lead to a positive and vital empowerment, to the original and transcendent tones of a new song (Antosh, 2006).

Although reviewers of Tremblay’s recent play *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* (1998) focus on the monologues of the angry mother who rants about everyday concerns for the well-being of her child, a character much like the one who initiated Tremblay’s career (the old song), the author wishes to focus on how the narrator’s memory of his mother stage by stage in his life enacted before our eyes, permits Tremblay to self-consciously explain that his artistry reaches far beyond bringing the people he knew best in his youth, who had no knowledge of theater history, acting, and directing and staging to the stage. His growth as an artist and his “new songs” are a result of his continuous development of that knowledge.

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Prologue: World Religions Deify Mothers and Define Their Roles

Because the author will be focusing on what the Narrator, obviously an autobiographical reflection of Tremblay himself, terms his responses to the “universal mother”, the author will be working with the English translation of For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again prepared by Linda Gaboriau to be performed at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal to celebrate the 30-year anniversary of Tremblay’s Les Belles Soeurs. His first play had sparked major controversy because it fore-grounded women of Montreal’s working class speaking the regional “low-French” dialect, joual (Borgstrom, 1999, p. 325). Before Tremblay’s narrator introduces his universal mother in For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again, he provides a prologue in which he evokes many of the most tragic dramatic moments from classical theater that will not be staged this evening such as Richard’s “My Kingdom for a horse!”, Hamlet senior’s ghost on the battlements, Nora’s slamming the door, Stanley’s rape of Blanche, and the Nurse’s revelation of the malady of Phaedra. Instead, Tremblay’s narrator indicates we will recognize the woman he is about to introduce, for she is everywhere. She is universal. She is Rodrigue’s aunt, Electra’s cousin, Ivanov’s sister, Caligula’s stepmother, Mistress Quickly’s little niece, the mother of Ham or of Clov, or perhaps of both. And when she speaks in her own words, people who speak differently will understand her, in her own words. She has existed throughout the ages and in every culture. She has always been present and always will be.

By indicating that Nana, “the mother” is a universal; Tremblay’s narrator stimulates the audience to reflect on the fact that nearly all world religions define roles for mothers through their religious law or through their deification or glorification of mothers, whether Demeter of the early Greek pre-Christian era, the Hindu mother goddess, or the Catholic deification of Mary Mother of Jesus. The latter is most familiar in Tremblay’s Montreal, where the majority of Christians are practicing Catholics, glorifying the mother Mary whose son Jesus reached out to the marginalized in his society.

Mother vs. 10-Year-Old Narrator: A Contrast of Daydreaming and Imagination

With what seems an opposite display, Tremblay’s Nana opens with “Go to your room. Right this minute! How could you do such a thing? … Maybe you’ve reached the age of reason, but you’re inexperienced.” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 9).

Tremblay skillfully and plausibly shifts his language to fit dramatic purpose from scene to scene. The action begins with a prologue spoken by a reliable narrator. The viewer accepts his statements of fact and judgment about the “universal” woman without serious question. When the narrator assumes the role of a 10-year-old character his language shifts appropriately. In the role of Nana’s son, the narrator rationalizes his imitation of others in throwing a chunk of ice under the train with the phrase all too familiar to parents: “Everybody was doing it!” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 9).

As the first scene between mother and son continues, Tremblay as a playwright must introduce the conflict and his theme, in this case, an exploration of responses to death, through dramatic foreshadowing. Therefore, Nana relays to her son that how her usual singing as she was wringing the laundry was interrupted by seeing a policeman in her dining room:

I thought someone had died! I thought someone was dead! Your father, or one of your brothers, or you! Do you know what went through my mind, eh, have you any idea? Maybe it only lasted a few seconds, who knows, but I saw a corpse,
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covered with a plaid blanket, cut in two by a streetcar or squashed by a bus, and that corpse was one of you! … Do you
realize how that makes a mother feel? Eh? Answer me. (Tremblay, 1998, pp. 10-11)

Although she asks for a response, Nana feeling the emotion that accompanies such fears continues: “I didn’t
dare ask him who had died, you hear me, I was afraid I’d collapse and die right there myself. … Two deaths in the
family, the same day, that’s one too many! But no? Nobody died” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 12).

Through this all too familiar rant of a mother at a son who has disappointed her, Tremblay creates
foreshadowing that his drama will also end on the happy note “nobody died”. In that final scene, although Nana
indicates she is about to give birth to her death, the staged euphemism for her passing to life beyond leaves the
audience with the sense that “nobody died”.

In the opening scene of For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again, Tremblay evokes the comic happy ending
found in Catholic Dante’s Divine Comedy (1308-1321) as Nana coaches the 10-year-old to not take the Lord’s
name in vain (Tremblay, 1998, p. 14) but to confess his misdemeanor, after which she does not punish him. Their
conversation then turns as the son credits Nana with giving him his “imagination”, an ambiguous label evident in
the dialogue which follows. Nana responds, “I’d rather imagine the worst and be relived, than imagine nothing,
and be surprised when trouble strikes!” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 17).

Nana leaves the stage and returns for a coda, which at first glance seems unrelated but clearly distinguishes
between a playwright’s ability to deal creatively with reality and giving the imagination free reign to elaborate
mental representation having little similarity to the real world. The narrator in the role of the 10-year-old son
judges her often repeated report of an accident that Aunt Gertrude had when daydreaming while doing laundry as
exaggerated fantasy. According to Nana’s rendition, Aunt Gertrude kept turning the wringer handle until she had
put her whole arm through and had to be stitched up “from the tip of her indexed finger to her armpit” (Tremblay,
1998, p. 20). The narrator, enacting the 10-year-old son already challenges Nana by pointing to the difference in
imagination and exaggeration. In an aside speaking for Tremblay, the narrator explains why such fantasy will not
work in theater: “Sometimes she was the only one who understood the point of her stories” (Tremblay, 1998, p.
22). Tremblay’s playwriting demands more than capturing the talk of his mother to whom he is giving homage; it
requires selecting metaphorical talk which will advance the theme of his play.

Mother vs. 13-Year-Old Narrator: A Contrast of Reading to Spur the Emotions
and to Spur the Imagination

In the second scene, the narrator takes on the role of the 13-year-old son of Nana. At this age, the son
discovers that he reads for different reasons than Nana reads three of her favorite books. She loves beautiful
tear-jerkers even when the plots are illogical. He has her Patira (1875) by Raoul de Navery in hand, a book which
the Irish Ecclesiastical Record of 1887 praised for portraying the reverence the French had for the Madonna
before the revolution, although the review added that:

It would add to the perfection of the plot, and to the satisfaction of the reader, if it were told what became of Tanguy,
what of Patrina, and what of the child. There is an improbability about Patrina’s delaying to file down the bars of the
window in order to provide a means of escape for the prisoner and her child. Would not Tanguy have released his wife and
child, had he been informed, even privately, of their imprisonment? (Connor, 1887, p. 96)
As they discuss Nana’s favorite sentimental novel *Patria*, the narrator in the role of the 13-year-old son makes it clear that while Nana may have instilled a love for reading in him, their reasons for reading are quite different. He asks Nana: “Do the French really go around abandoning their kids like that? Their books make it sound like the roads of France are full of abandoned children who are starving to death and filthy dirty—” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 23). He adds, “Aren’t books supposed to be like real life?” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 26). He then questions how that Blanche de Coetquen could spend the whole winter there in the dungeon, give birth to her baby without a doctor, and saw the bars of her prison with a tiny file. Nana defends her tastes by responding that the events in this plot are as likely as those in all those Jules Verne novels he reads. To maintain his focus on where his plot development for this drama, *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again*, is going, this tiny reference to Jules Verne is important, for Tremblay will use a familiar Hollywood image associated with one of Jules Verne’s best known fictions to end his play. However, to be credible, the current scene in Tremblay’s drama must continue discussion of Nana’s French novel. Tremblay also chooses details from it which point to the conclusion for his play. In *Patira* the jealous brothers-in-law imprison Blanche, because she is not a real princess. As Nana and her 13-year-old-son discuss how that one becomes royalty, or blue bloods, Nana says she was taught in school that the Lord told one Louis that he had been chosen to be the king of France because of what he had done. Nana and her son then realize that several European countries share a similar story, which causes the 13-year-old to add “All I would have to do is claim that the Good Lord appeared to tell me he’d appointed me king of Canada, and then my blood would be blue?” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 37).

Nana chides that it would not be true for her son explaining, “I’m your mother, I’d know it wasn’t true. Mothers know everything” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 37).

However, to keep the plot of his drama focused on the “universal” woman introduced in the prologue, Tremblay creates the following response from the 13-year-old son:

> Your grandparents were Cree from Saskatchewan—And they’d settled here a long time before the Europeans arrived—So how come the Good Lord never appeared to tell them they had blue blood? How come he just appeared in Europe? I don’t think that’s fair! (Tremblay, 1998, p. 39)

Nana responds: “But what do you expect, it comes from the Good Lord and the Cree didn’t know the Lord. Or maybe he didn’t know them” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 40). As their analysis continues, Nana realizes, “When you get right down to it, there must’ve been a Cree who deserved it” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 42). With this one line, Tremblay as playwright introduces a new possibility for the resolution of his drama.

In Nana’s coda to this scene, Tremblay dramatizes how important ambiguous wording is to keep the audience guessing until the end of the drama. In this case, Nana in natural conversation renews the “universal woman” theme from the prologue. Nana, sending her son on an errand to return buttons, fears that the merchant will not provide refund if he knows for sure who is sending the request. Therefore, the son must say “The woman says she doesn’t want them”, rather than “My mother does not want them” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 46).

**Mother vs. 16-Year-Old Narrator: A Contrast of the Real Self and Theatrical Roles**

In the third scene, the narrator takes on the role of Nana’s 16-year-old son turned playwright, a subject Nana does not understand. In an ironic long monologue Nana report of her sleepless night pondering questions spurred
by watching her favorite female television performer Huguette Oligny, who was later to play a lead role in Tremblay’s *Albertine in Five Times* (1984). Nana wonders how “that woman talked for almost two and a half hours straight, non-stop” in a live performance. Reflecting on how she is disguised as someone different in every performance, she asks “but who is she really?” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 48). Nana then wonders if the actress ever thinks about who I am or her audience (Tremblay, 1998, p. 50). She concludes “I’d like to be as important in her life as she is in mine. But I guess that’s too much to hope for” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 51). She exits long enough for the Narrator to express Tremblay, the artists’ regrets that his Nana never saw the wings of theatre or a television studio, she never attended a rehearsal, a costume fitting, a preview or an opening night. She left without knowing how it all works. “It’s one of the greatest regrets in my life. I would have loved to introduce her to Huguette Oligny, so the possibility that Madame Oligny might think of her form time to time, could exist” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 51). In the epilogue for this third scene, Nana’s complaint about her regular Saturday supper guests, her son’s Aunt Gertrude, Uncle Alfred, and their boring daughter Lucille for what will soon be 30 years (Tremblay, 1998, p. 52) conveys Tremblay’s knowledge as a playwright who plots with characters in the same roles as in previous ones kill audience interest. As Nana continues, she indicates she is sick of seeing Uncle Alfred imitate Fernadel’s “sissy gestures”, and hearing him “sing like Fernadel” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 54) week after week, to convey Tremblay’s awareness that the action must also be varied, which is conveyed when the son retorts with the reality that she prepares the same menu every Saturday night.

In the coda for this scene, although the narrator as a 16-year-old complains he has heard details of cousin Lucille’s recital “thousands of times, Ma”, Nana delivers them with the same distaste she felt when she attended only because of the build-up given by Aunt Gertrude. For Nana, every detail of the costuming, casting, and performance were so implausible that she made excuses to leave at the first intermission, and to this day swears to never tell Aunt Gertrude that she enjoyed the evening. That is how theater audiences are, frequently never giving a playwright a second chance.

Before Nana returns a second time, the narrator tells us that Aunt Gertrude died of a heart attack before Nana and she made up. True to her tendency to exaggerate and add humor to any event, Nana gives her farcical rendition of how that Aunt Gertrude died one Saturday morning while doing her regular routines. According to Nana, it was as if she were doing a hula on all fours while waxing the floors, so that her husband watched her die without realizing it. The lines that Gertrude’s husband watched her die without realizing it is Tremblay’s bridge to scene four in which Nana confesses that she herself is dying by asking the narrator playing the role of her son, “Will you take care of your father for me when I’m gone?” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 66). Unable to confront the reality, the son is now the one who jokes back “You can’t expect me to give him his spoonful of Milk of Magnesia every day before he leaves for work” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 67). Although Nana and the narrator as son share memories of their earlier years, Nana expresses a mother’s regret that her son is not settled.

**Summary: Mother Nurtured Narrator Son’s Imagination, Reclusive Reading Habits, and Love of Theatre Arts**

The narrator as son comforts her by saying: “If I make something of my life, I’ll owe it all to you!” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 72). Although the narrator eventually proclaims that everything is possible in theater when
he surprises Nana with magnificent music and a set depicting the plains of Saskatchewan with a rippling lake in the background and she discovers that the back of the set is so ugly and unfinished, both she and Tremblay’s audience very willingly suspend disbelief as the scene continues. When the narrator signals descent of an enormous pair of angel wings holding a wicker basket from on high, opens the little door and lets Nana in, she proclaims, “I feel like I am going for a balloon ride!” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 78). Although she is unsure she is headed for heaven, she proclaims she is having a good time and ends with “Oh, my God!”.

In this homage to his mother, *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again*, Tremblay makes it clear that his successful career had its foundation in how his mother nurtured his imagination, his reclusive reading habits, and his love for theater arts, while also making it clear that his playwriting success depends on mastering the art of constructing a plot that fascinates and impassions the reader/viewer. As the allusions to Jules Verne and performers in Hollywood versions of his titles make clear, Tremblay’s artistry makes the death ending in *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* a “magical apparition” instead of a “vision of horror!”.

Whether one is a Cree Indian in Saskatchewan who sees death as physical only permitting the spirit to join ranks of ancestors who went before to become one of the dancing spirits of the dead that appear as the northern lights or a French Catholic who believes in the saving grace of Jesus which gives us an afterlife in heaven, Tremblay’s comic treatment of death by glorifying Nana has universal appeal.

**References**


