

The Death of a Mother in Childhood: Reflected in the Work of Two Writers

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Abstract: From absolute dependence at the beginning of life, there are gradual changes to relative dependence on the way to independence. In the event of the mother's failure or sudden death in the early stages, the process of development is distorted. This article deals with the loss of the mother in early childhood of two writers and how their mothers' deaths influence their life and work.

Keywords: family systems, human development, attachment

“There is no such thing as an infant...whenever one finds an infant one finds maternal care and without maternal care there would be no infant”
(Winnicott, 1960/1990, p. 39).

The mother is the first facilitating environment, the person responsible for providing the “holding,” equipping, and enabling the feeling of self-realization. In Winnicott's view, in the initial absolute dependence stage, a good-enough mother is one who adapts herself to her baby's needs and can identify with him. This is a mother who is able to devote herself entirely, for a limited period, to safeguarding her baby's ability to continue living. She allows herself to be created by the baby, and the baby is able to experience the illusion of creation that later will serve as a source for a constant creative life. If at the very moment that the baby is hungry and

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anticipates the breast, the mother appears with the food, the baby then feels he has created the breast and experiences himself as one who has created the providing mother, "I just thought about her and she's here exactly as I imagined. I created her in the way I wanted" (Winnecott, 1956/1975, p. 42). Winnecott referred to the mother's heightened sensitive state as "primary maternal preoccupation."

In the second stage of development, relative dependence, the mother gradually reduces her level of adaptation in accord with the infant's needs. Only when the baby begins to experience the mother as a separate object and not as part of his fantasy, can she then expose him gradually to the environment and to a level of frustration that he is able to bear. The baby can already wait a few minutes for food because he is aware of what is happening around him and is familiar with the noises that indicate the food will soon appear. The waiting leads to the beginning of an awareness that the mother exists as a separate object from him, which marks the beginning of separateness. The path is therefore that of almost absolute dependence at the beginning, gradually changing to relative dependence on the way to independence.

When the "towards independence" stage is achieved, the acceptance of reality begins—a never-ending task. Human beings are never free from the tension between internal reality (fantasies, dreams, wishes, and desires) and external reality (the realization of fantasies in reality, with their laws and limits), between which is the intermediate area of experience and creation (Winnicott, 1963, p. 83-92).

Thus, from absolute dependence through relative dependence the child gradually develops and acquires autonomy, personal identity, a feeling of substance, and the ability to grasp the environment as an external phenomenon over which he has some control, while realizing that there are also limits to this ability. In normal development the child gradually becomes autonomous and becomes able to accept responsibility.

The process begins with maternal care, followed by parental care, and continues to the extended family, which together provide the individual with the opportunity to journey further afield outside the family, and from there to educational frameworks and participation in various social groups. This is a widening circle that extends into culture and/or belief. When the baby experiences good early holding, the world is endowed with personal meaning in which he can live a creative life.

In the event of the mother's failure or sudden death in the early stages of the individual's life, the process of development is distorted, which interrupts the "going-on-being" of the infant/child. The infant invariably reacts with frustration and the feeling of a threat of annihilation. Description of this state, according to Winnicott (1956/1975, p. 303), includes the word death. In *The Dead Mother*, Green (1986) describes the process, "The dead mother...the mother remains alive, but for the young child is perceived as emotionally dead" (p. 98). This description refers to a

mother who is absent as a result of depression, and the child feels a threat of being abandoned. There seems to be something there—a something, however, that does not make contact and is unavailable and it is difficult for the child/baby to realize that there is nothing there.

This article, however, deals with the loss of a real mother in the early childhood of two writers and how their mothers' deaths influence their life and work. The two writers were born in Europe: one in Romania, now Ukraine, in 1930, and the other in Russia in 1828.

Dan Pagis (1930-1986) – Hebrew Poet

Dan Pagis was born in Rădăuți, Bukovina in Romania, which is now part of Ukraine. When he was four years old, his father went alone to the Land of Israel to prepare a home for his family. In that year, 1934, his mother Yehudit (Yuly) died suddenly, and Dan was taken care of by his grandparents. In his youth, his grandfather's extensive library was a both a source of interest and a fount of knowledge, and probably the place where the influence of the poet Rilke began. From 1941 to 1944, Dan Pagis was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, and in 1946 at the age of 17 he came to the Land of Israel, the place he had so dreamed about in his early youth. He met his father, but their relationship remained distant. He spent several years on a kibbutz before moving to Jerusalem and beginning his studies at the Hebrew University, later becoming a professor in Hebrew literature. Dan Pagis died of cancer in Jerusalem in 1986.

Dan Pagis is described as a very closed person who was loath to talk about his childhood. Unwilling to expose himself, he tried to suppress any memory of the trauma of the Holocaust. In writing he found a way of expressing his inconsolable grief. The main characteristics of his poems are strong ridicule, suspiciousness, criticism, and biting humor (Ben, 2016). An atmosphere of gloom, sadness, despair, and death permeates his poems. The imprint of the loss of his mother that he experienced in his childhood remained a gaping wound that never managed to heal. With the passing years he became a kind of vagabond child, lost in the world, and exposed to its dangers (Shabat-Nadir, 2016).

In her book, *Sudden Heart* (1995), his wife, Ada Pagis, describes Dan looking at old photographs and trying to decipher the riddle of his existence (p. 16). The early loss of his mother is clearly evident in his poems, "I am he, am I still living?" he asks himself repeatedly. Many of his poems deal with the mother image, "The mother kisses the child and is not there...the likeable father is over the seas..." (Pagis, D., 2009, p. 82). "In the month of her death she stands at the window...I gaze at her, nearly four...emerge slowly from the photograph and grow older, carefully, quietly, not to alarm her" (p. 277). In his poem "The Roll Call": "Only I am not there, am not there, am a mistake, turn off my eyes, quickly, erase my shadow..." (p. 136). "Tonight while he lies flat on his back, the ceiling facing him is the

screen of a silent film...the mother kisses the child and is not there, the child chases after her climbing the walls...he himself will remain in the darkness” (p. 222). In vain, Dan will wander, indecipherable, in the literary environment without a father and without a mother.

In a children’s book he wrote and illustrated, *The Egg that Disguised Itself*, the poet who lost his mother almost before he “hatched from the egg” describes how the egg searches for a friend, and when it does not succeed tries to disguise itself, but this too does not succeed. When a chick emerges from the egg it cannot find the chicken that laid it, because it had died.

In his poems, Dan Pagis is greatly occupied with death: “I live inside death.” In the poem, “The Caveman Is Not About to Talk,” (Pagis, D., 2009, p.126) he expresses a strong desire to again meet his mother, even after death: “Still in my cave, complexion like a baby’s / Pink and soft and wonderfully at ease / Never expelled from Mama’s cozy womb” (p. 126, translated by Stephen Mitchell).

The poem that to me best demonstrates the effect of the death of Pagis’s mother on his life is, “My Childhood Slipped Away” (Pagis, 2009, p.41, translation by Gila Abrahamson).

My childhood slipped away and with its loss
Has stripped me of my myths and left just me behind.
The story of my life is nothing but a fabrication.
In vain will I still seek to find its image
In vain will sail to Tarsus and Ophir.
The purest gold of my beliefs has been enfolded
In my leaden weight of knowledge, turned to ashes.

Here Pagis (Pagis, A., 1995, p.25) describes the memory of a good and happy childhood that was lost. The poem expresses well the heavy price exacted by the loss and the disappearance of the dream, in the wake of which he becomes a dull and desperate practical person, one who can no longer make use of fantasy, because he no longer has the beloved mother who will represent real life for him.

Losing a mother at age four is particularly difficult for a child who is not yet able to mourn her, but also unable to forget her image (Winnicott, 1963/1990).

At too early an age, Dan Pagis had to understand that death is irreversible and with no possibility for repair. Reality for him is living with a feeling of loss. Neither search nor hope exist. Everything is enveloped in a bland and hopeless cloak.

The connection between internal reality (phantasies, dreams, wishes, desires, etc.) and the external world (fulfilling dreams, laws, restrictions, etc.) that existed previously in the transitional space is severed. In the above poem, Dan Pagis forcefully expresses the trauma he experienced in

his childhood in the wake of his mother's death, a trauma that is irreversible, and a reality of loss that is final.

Lev (Leo) Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828-1910)
Renowned Russian Author and Poet

Lev Tolstoy was born in the Yasnaya Polyana estate, the fourth of the five children of Mariya and Nikolay Illich Tolstoy (Nikolay, Sergey, Dmitry, Lev, and Mariya). When he was only 23 months old, his mother, Mariya, died and his father's distant cousin Tatyana Ergolsky (Aunt Toinette) took charge of the children. Shortly thereafter, Tolstoy's father died and an aunt, Alexandra Osten-Saken, became the children's legal guardian. When she died in 1840, the children were sent to Kazan, Russia, to another sister of their father, Pelageya Yushkov.

Tolstoy studied law in Kazan but did not complete his studies. He moved with his brother Nikolay to the Caucasus, enlisted in the army, where he began to write. In 1855 he was demobilized. In 1862, at age 34, he married Sonya (Sofia) Andreevna Behrs who bore him thirteen children, eight of whom survived childhood.

Among Tolstoy's famous works are *Childhood, Boyhood and Youth; War and Peace*; and *Anna Karenina*. Tolstoy is regarded as a superb writer, intelligent, energetic, and proud. At the same time, he was consumed by doubt and full of contradictions. "His senses absorbed everything with a far greater intensity than that of most people" (Troyat, 1967).

The following text dealing with the death of Tolstoy's mother is taken from his diary written a few years before his death, "I walk in the garden and I think of my mother, of Maman. I do not remember her, but she has always been an ideal of saintliness for me....felt dull and sad all day. Toward evening the mood changed into a desire for caresses, for tenderness. I wanted, as when I was a child, to nestle against some tender and compassionate being and weep with love and be consoled...become a tiny boy, close to my mother, the way I imagine her. Yes, yes, my Maman, whom I was never able to call that because I did not know how to talk when she died. She is my highest image of love – not cold, divine love, but warm earthy love, maternal...Maman, hold me, baby me!...All that is madness, but it is also true" (Troyat, 1967, p.14).

The mother died suddenly after the birth of his sister, Mariya. Possibly the mother's additional pregnancy, at the time that Lev was still a baby, contributed to her distancing herself from him, so that her absence was already keenly felt in his earliest childhood.

In the above quote the mother is presented as in Tolstoy's imagination. He tried to remember the image of his mother, but in vain. No photograph of her exists. Even as an adult, Tolstoy carries the image of his mother as a young girl, a fanciful figure to whom he is drawn in his imagination. He writes: "When I examine myself I discover...experience egoistical

hallucinations. Where will I draw the love and the willingness for sacrifice when all I have in my heart is arrogance and self-love” (Troyat, 1967).

The powerful longings for the absent mother accompanied Tolstoy throughout his life, and affected his personality and his work. The unavailability of a mother figure to mourn remained entrenched in his imagination and phantasy, even though he had a loving substitute during his childhood years, his Aunt Toinette.

In Summary

This article deals with two writers who lost their mothers in infancy, and the traumatic effects of this sudden loss on their lives and work. As we saw above, there are significant differences in the response of the two writers to the death of their mother.

In one of his many case studies, Winnicott (1963/1990) describes the effect of a mother’s death on three different-aged siblings: before the age of one; age four; and age six. He found that the four-year-old suffered greatly and was unable to find consolation. The baby, however, connected to a substitute mother, and the six-year-old was able to mourn and continue to build himself.

Regarding the two writers, Dan Pagis lost his mother at age four and remained immersed in unresolved mourning. All his life he wrestled with the loss and the pain, feelings that he expressed in poems filled with sadness and longing. For him, fantasy and the dream world were unable to provide relief and support; what remained was despair and suffering. Tolstoy’s mother disappeared from his life when he was very young, even before he was able to call her “Maman.” We observe him dealing with the absence of a mother by drawing on a world of fantasy, dreams, and creativity. He also had a substitute in the form of an aunt, Toinette, who cared for him warmly throughout his childhood. In his childhood memories written in his old age, he writes about his longing for his mother that remained hidden in his inner world, but that nevertheless affected his way of life and his work.

The two writers suffered from the loss of their mothers in their early years, but each reacted differently, according to their age and their environment.

Winnicott’s quote above bears repeating (1960/1990, p. 39), “There is no such thing as an infant...whenever one finds an infant one finds maternal care and without maternal care there would be no infant.”

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