

Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

Mother and Son (1929)

Now all day long the man who is not dead
Hastens the dark with inattentive eyes,
The lady of the white hand, of the erect head
Stares at the cover, leans for the son's replies
At last to her importunate womanhood--
That hand of death laid on the living bed;
Such is the fierce compositor of blood.

She waits; he lies upon the bed of sin
Where greed, avarice, anger writhed and slept
Till to their silence they were gathered in;
There, fallen with time, his tall and wicked kin
Once fired the passions that were never kept
In the permanent heart, and there his mother lay
To hear him on the impenetrable day.

Because of this she cannot will her hand
Up to the bed nor break the manacle
Her exile sets upon her harsh command
That he should say the time is beautiful,
Transfigured with her own devouring light:
The sick man craves the impalpable night.

Loosed betwixt eye and lid, the swimming beans
Of memory, that school of cuttlefish
Rise to the air, plunge to the cold streams,
Rising and plunging the half-forgotten wish
To tear his heart out in some slow disgrace
And freeze the hue of terror to her face.

Hate, misery and fear beat off his heart
To the dry fury of the woman's mind;
The son prone in his autumn, moves apart
A seed blown upon a returning wind:
O child, be vigilant till towards the South
On the flowered wall all the sweet afternoon
That reach of sun, swift as the cottonmouth
Strikes at the black crucifix on her breast
Where the cold dusk comes suddenly to rest--
Mortality will speak the victor soon!

The dreary flies lazy and casual
Stick to the ceiling, buzz along the wall--
O heart, the spider shuffles from the mold
Weaving between the pinks and grapes his pall.
The bright wallpaper imperishably old
Uncurls and flutters; it will never fall.

ANALYSIS

"Mother and Son" is an intense exploration of the themes of family destiny and death.... The struggle between parent and child in "Mother and Son" is another dramatic presentation of the personal will imposed on a resisting reality. The mother attempts to turn decline and defeat into triumph and rebirth. She is locked in a death struggle with her moribund son; but it is she, 'the fierce compositress of blood,' who insists in a 'harsh command / That he should say the time is beautiful.' The dying man knows that the tradition she is trying so desperately to save and impose on him is a wraith, a ghostly symbol of his own mortality....

The man is mortal; his tattered culture, ironically figured in the vine-and-grape motif of the 'bright wallpaper,' has an imperishable quality that he cannot challenge. The room in which the son is dying is a symbolic reflection of the world he is rejecting by accepting death. Though the signs of decay are about him, evidence of the past still manages to hang on, like the wallpaper that only half conceals the wall whose decay it covers. The wallpaper and the wall seem to be analogous to the relationship between a culture and its supporting civilization. The culture never perishes, even if it is transformed by history into new forms; but civilizations rise and fall according to the material structures that constitute them. In a poem that seems to be exclusively concerned with a personal conflict, Tate has carried forward his reflections on the larger dimensions of history.

The locus of life and death in this poem is the bed on which the dying son lies.... This unyielding son was born into an inescapable condition from which he can exit only in death. His 'tall and bitter kin' have left nothing permanent from their own lives, except the bed where he lies. He is an Orestes, caught between the command to defend the honor of his forefathers and the 'dry fury' of his mother's domination, summed up in the snakelike attack of the sun at the 'black crucifix on her breast,' a symbol of salvation but also a sign of death. There is no release from the struggle, except through mortality, which 'will speak the victory soon.' The poet does not attempt to resolve the tensions between mother and son, but he does suggest the despair and horror attendant upon a man whose honesty will not allow him to accept a false solution of his dilemma. The mother is more than the spectral fury of "Sonnets of the Blood." In this poem she seems to be the personal will itself, demanding that her son assume an optimism he cannot possibly believe in as a proper stance for transforming the times. The crucifix, which represents an alternative way of making the world beautiful, has no transcendent dimensions for him. Like Lucy Buchan, the dying man is listening for the night.

What Tate means by true history, as opposed to personal will, is described in an essay on Faulkner, where he explains that by *myth* he means 'a dramatic projection of heroic action, or of the tragic failure of heroic action, upon the reality of the common life of a society so that the myth *is* reality.' The myth is imperishable, but the civilization is not. The South, for instance, 'had to be destroyed, the good along with the evil.' There are no perfect lives, no perfect civilizations. In seeking this abstract perfection, man sets himself impossible goals. In attempting to discover some system of superior benefit to mankind, he actively destroys those orders in the present which, like all earthly civilizations, contain both good and evil. In speaking of the 'Southern myth,' Tate offers a commentary on a historical situation that makes plain his own exploration in 'Sonnets of the Blood' and 'Mother and Son':

The South, afflicted with the curse of slavery--a curse, like that of Original Sin, for which no single person is responsible--had to be destroyed, the good along with the evil. The old order had a great deal of good, one of the "goods" being a result of the evil; for slavery itself entailed a certain moral responsibility which the capitalist employer in free societies did not need to exercise if it was not his will to do so. This old order, in which the good could not be salvaged from the bad, was replaced by a new order which was in many ways worse than the old.... The cynical materialism of the new order brought to the South the American standard of living, but it also brought about a society similar to that which Matthew Arnold saw in the North in the eighties and called vigorous and uninteresting.'...

Modern man, as he notes from the beginning of his career, has become abstract, visually exclusive, and bound to the letter of the word. He is incapable of seeing beyond a single level of meaning because his imagination has lost this perspective that memory supplies. Evidence of this blindness is prevalent

throughout Tate's poetry, but it is especially prominent in 'the image of woman that all men both pursue and flee.' Feminine figures in his first poems--the Duchess of Malfi or the degraded women of 'Bored on Choresis,' 'The Flapper,' and 'Hitch Your Wagon to a Star'--are ineffectual wraiths rather than images of hope.... Only in a translation of a fragmentary poem by Sappho, 'Farewell to Anactoria,' is there an image of femininity untouched by modern irony. These negative or incomplete images of woman continue to appear in subsequent verse. 'Inside and Outside,' 'The Robber Bridegroom,' 'Last Days of Alice,' 'Mother and Son,' and 'Sonnets of the Blood' offer weak, perverse, or overbearing and masculine depictions of women. With the exception of the dead woman in 'The Anabasis,' one looks in vain for a figure embodying positive feminine virtues. Tate tries to find in each of them some pagan image of life and fertility that remains meaningful in the modern world....

The powerful influence of a mother to whom the son refuses to yield, presented in 'Mother and Son,' is reversed in 'Seasons of the Soul,' where the speaker has learned, as Augustine did, to accept the figure of the mother freely because he recognizes for the first time all that she stands for."

Robert S. Dupree

Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry
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"On July 19, 1929, Allen was on the Grand Hotel de Cornouailles terrace when a cable-gram arrived from his brother Ben in America: their mother was dead.... He was overwhelmed with guilt as he remembered his rebellion against his mother in 1924. The more he thought about having been absent 'in Mama's last hours,' the deeper he sank into depression.... Perhaps Tate would have felt less guilt if he had not spent so many hours in Europe thinking about the relationship of men to their mothers.... Only days before he learned of his mother's death, he was at work revising a poem he titled 'Mother and Son,' one of the most intensely personal poems he had ever written.

The poem, which the literary critic Louis Untermeyer thought 'without reservation, the best thing' he had read of Tate's so far, made an analogy between a son and a 'cuttlefish.' Tate selected the small marine animal as a symbol because of its ability to blind prey with a dark ink and then hide in it. The parallel, he later explained, was that 'a man in emotional danger withdraws into his private mind where not even maternal love can follow him and where he becomes mysterious and menacing.' It may not have been coincidental that the poem took final shape shortly after Hart Crane visited Paris and confided in Tate about his traumatic childhood. Although Tate later concluded--perhaps thinking of himself--'that many young men have had parents like the Cranes but did not become homosexual,' he was moved by the experiences of another poet who grew up listening to 'the constant quarreling of his mother and father.'

Spending so much time thinking about his mother made Tate reflect on the destruction of his family. Living in Europe, he explained to Edmund Wilson, was 'like going back to some scene of one's childhood.' As he studied the farming towns in France, he not only felt nostalgia for the places his mother had taken him to as a small boy, but reached the conclusion that the Civil War was responsible both for the ruination of the Ohio Valley where he grew up, and for 'the defeat of independent agrarian communities' all over America. Owing to John Gould Fletcher, he had come to value a book called *The American Heresy*, by Christopher Hollis, a British Catholic who argued that the two distinct nations that once existed within America were transformed by the Civil War into a single country. The North's industrial obsession had destroyed the European values of feudalism and in doing so had replaced 'agrarian aristocracies' with 'middle class urban impulses.' Having an opportunity to see the stable agrarian communities in Europe helped convince Tate that his own family had dispersed as a direct result of this industrialism. 'My hatred of the "Yankees," he wrote to Mark Van Doren, '...is only personal in the most extreme sense--that is, I hate the force that destroyed the background of my family and ultimately set me adrift in the world'....

'Mother and Son' appeared eventually in *New Republic* 64 (27 Aug. 1930)... Years later, Tate was angered by John L. Stewart's reading of 'Mother and Son' in *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton, 1965), 314. 'The inferences you draw from my Mother and Son about the character of my mother I find disconcerting,' Tate wrote Stewart. 'Even had she been a "dominating woman," I do not see how this would in any way aid the critic in elucidating the poem: the poem speaks for itself' (Tate to Stewart, 26 May 1965, JLS). Stewart, Tate elaborated to Louis Rubin, 'infers from 'Sonnets of the Blood'

and 'Mother and Son' that my mother was a 'dominating woman' who created tension in the family difficult for a sensitive boy to deal with. And from 'A Vision' he infers that my mother was 'proud of her ties with this group'--meaning Tidewater Virginia. I simply had to write him a letter of protest about this. What is his evidence for it? You know what Southern women of that generation were like: they took their family connection for granted.' (Tate to Rubin, 4 June 1965...) Although Tate also complained to Warren and Davidson about Stewart's reading (see Tate to Davidson, 29 May 1965...)...and Tate to Warren, 8 June 1965...), he would soon make similar criticisms of his mother in his aborted memoir."

Thomas A. Underwood
Allen Tate: Orphan of the South
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Michael Hollister (2021)