

## Reflection Statement

Our mothers amaze and horrify us; nurture and haunt us. The mother daughter relationship is unique in that it both shapes our identity and threatens to destroy it. *I Have Hung Our Cave with Roses* is an exploration of the reconciliation of identity in this relationship, and how this produces dual emotions of admiration and rejection. For my protagonists, Mary and Joan, this duality makes conflict impossible to meaningfully resolve, particularly through language, which is intrinsically disruptive to this relationship.

I am drawn to theatre because it is uniquely immersive. Not only does theatre have an immediacy that does not exist even in form such as film or poetry, but the presence of other forms of communication, such as intonation and physicality also complicates the way in which language is viewed and understood. For this reason, I believe that tension in the mother daughter relationship can be provocatively explored through a drama script. Theatre gives voice to what Julia Kristeva establishes as the most fundamental tension in this relationship in *Desire in Language*<sup>1</sup> – the tension between the semiotic (communication that can pluralise meaning, traditionally associated with the instinctual world of the mother) and the symbolic (communication with definitive meaning, such as language). Kristeva posits that the development of language allows the child to become a ‘speaking subject,’<sup>2</sup> and to develop a sense of identity separate from the mother. Despite the child’s rejection of the semiotic, during the acquisition of language, the child also seeks to reunite with the mother through more instinctual communication but fears the loss of identity that this threatens. By portraying communication holistically, a stage play offered the potential to explore how language shapes identity and relationships in an immediate and dynamic fashion. Most of the times I have been to the theatre have been with my own mother, and I imagine that a female audience might be interested in this piece as they try to negotiate this relationship in their own lives.

This tension between the simultaneous desire for distance and closeness formed the basis of my concept. For Mary, this stems partly from the difficulty to reconcile the mother’s identity with her own. According to Kristeva, the mother acts as a double of the daughter, thus giving ‘the gift of identity and the danger of its loss’<sup>3</sup> if the daughter is not able to differentiate

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<sup>1</sup> Kristeva, J., *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982., p. 241

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

herself. In the same scene, Mary tells Joan ‘I think you deserve better than that’<sup>4</sup> and, later, ‘you horrify me.’<sup>5</sup> Given Mary’s age, this duality is complicated further by the conflict that she experiences between maternal desire and a fear of motherhood. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* posits that young women see the prospect of motherhood as both appealing and as ‘a threat to the integrity of her precious person’<sup>6</sup>. Despite Mary’s apparent rejection of motherhood, ‘the more I think about the world right now, the less inclined I feel to bring a child into it,’<sup>7</sup> her instinct for nurturance and creation is evident from her ambitions as a writer. Throughout my script, I wanted Mary’s writing of the play to reflexively act as a conceit for her desire to reproduce her own identity, and I aimed to draw a close comparison between these ambitions and maternal desire.

Similarly, for Joan, motherhood simultaneously gives meaning to identity and threatens to erase it. I was influenced by Sylvia Plath’s portrayal of motherhood in poems such as “Nick and the Candlestick” and “Morning Song” in *Ariel*<sup>8</sup>, which illuminate how the child as a double of the mother both threatens and promises to preserve the mother’s identity. In my major work, the construction of Mary’s play serves as a symbol of this tension. To give up the power of authorship of their relationship would undermine Joan’s ability to forge her identity alone, ‘I’m the ugly, evil Medusa that turned your poor, innocent father to stone, and you’re the brave knight who’s cutting my head off and holding it up for everyone to see.’<sup>9</sup> However, this also guarantees the preservation of her identity and the significance of her role as a mother, ‘everything I wrote sounded too much like you’<sup>10</sup>. This dynamic is exacerbated by the motif of aging and illness throughout my script, ‘the official prognosis is that I’m getting old.’<sup>11</sup> I was also influenced by Plath’s poetry to analogise motherhood to martyrdom. By creating a pattern of religious imagery, ‘I am not playing the martyr; you are crucifying me!’<sup>12</sup>, I aimed to draw attention to the way motherhood both gives purpose to and threatens to destroy identity. This creates a duality of both admiration of and rejection for the daughter.

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<sup>4</sup> Major Work, p. 20

<sup>5</sup> Major Work p. 21

<sup>6</sup> De Beauvoir, S., *The Second Sex*, New York, Vintage Books, 1989., p. 602

<sup>7</sup> Major Work p. 15

<sup>8</sup> Plath, S., *Ariel*, London, Faber and Faber, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Major Work p. 22

<sup>10</sup> Major Work p. 27

<sup>11</sup> Major Work p. 24

<sup>12</sup> Major Work p. 22

The way in which relationships are articulated and understood through language forms a central part of my major work. I was prompted by my study of George Orwell's *1984*<sup>13</sup> in the common module Texts and Human Experiences to consider the way in which identity and relationships are constructed within the confines of language. The inadequacy of language to capture the full depth of relationships is particularly challenging in the mother daughter relationship, given the importance of more instinctual forms of communication in this relationship. I have used metatheatrical to depict language as a battleground. By creating a cyclical structure in my major work, I sought to illuminate that, given that both mothers and daughters pose threats to the reconciliation of each other's identities, their conflict can never be meaningfully resolved, particularly through language. Ultimately, Mary can never finish her play because she can never meaningfully author her relationship with Joan through language. Joan's final request 'will you still write to me even if you're not writing a play anymore?'<sup>14</sup> both guarantees the preservation of the relationship through language and undermines any attempt to resolve its conflict. Through a series of literary allusions, I also sought to draw attention to the way in which the roles of mother and daughter have been understood and performed. For example, allusion to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*<sup>15</sup>, 'in addition to her neck and torso, Orestes had stabbed [Clytemnestra] in her genitals'<sup>16</sup>, highlights the way in which maternal independence and sexuality have been depicted in literature. Thus, the depiction of language becomes integral to my portrayal of the mother daughter relationship.

Prompted by my study of *Waiting for Godot*<sup>17</sup> and the Theatre of the Absurd in Extension 1, I was influenced by the way that writers like Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee capture the idiosyncrasies of human relationships through their use of humour and the depiction of communication as absurd. In my postmodern context, I feel better able to capture the tensions of intimate relationships through a more stripped back style of realism that would be more applicable to a postmodern audience. I have striven to construct Mary and Joan as characters whom the audience can recognise as complicated and fully realised, whilst also examining the way in which they perform the roles of mother and daughter and participate in seemingly absurd behaviour. By oscillating between moments of pathos and moments of humour, 'Mary: I didn't let anything fester. I didn't need to see a psychologist. Joan: I think this milk

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<sup>13</sup> Orwell, G., *Nineteen Eighty Four*, London, Penguin Books, 1949.

<sup>14</sup> Major Work p. 28

<sup>15</sup> Carson A., *Oresteia: Agamemnon by Aiskhylos; Elektra by Sophokles; Orestes by Euripides*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux Inc, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Major Work p. 9

<sup>17</sup> Beckett, S., *Waiting for Godot*, London, Faber and Faber, 2006.

is expired, will you come and give it a sniff for me?’<sup>18</sup> I aimed to exemplify the duality of this relationship, as well as the absurdity and futility of their communication. Emulating works such as *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*<sup>19</sup> and *A Delicate Balance*<sup>20</sup>, I also constructed the characters of Jeannine and Lulu to act as foils for Mary and Joan. In the same way that Nick and Honey in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*<sup>21</sup> serve to amplify Martha and George’s idiosyncrasies, I satirised Jeannine and Lulu to call into question Mary and Joan’s own motivations and performativity. Jeannine’s devotion to her family life no matter the cost, ‘they will never get divorced for the sole reason that she’s too proud,’<sup>22</sup> forces the audience to reconsider Joan’s sense of obligation and identity. Similarly, Lulu’s excitement about the prospect of motherhood, ‘isn’t it exciting to think that we might have our own children soon?’<sup>23</sup> forces the audience to reconsider Mary’s maternal desire. Having a drama with four female characters also introduces questions of whether these characteristics are innate or rather, imposed and internalised.

Throughout my research and writing of this major work, I was struck by the paradox that if mothers and daughters were to sever contact and discard the importance of their relationship, they would lose a fundamental part of their identities. However, in maintaining closeness, they deny themselves the ability to forge their identities alone. The tension in my play is never fully resolved as I wanted to show that the wrestle for identity and actualisation is an enduring facet of the relationship between mothers and daughters.

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<sup>18</sup> Major Work p. 8

<sup>19</sup> Albee, E., *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, New York, Dramatists Play Service, 1962.

<sup>20</sup> Albee, E., *A Delicate Balance*, New York, Plume, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Albee, E., op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Major Work p. 19

<sup>23</sup> Major Work p. 15