

## *The Reproduction of Mothering in Charlotte's Web*

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Nancy Chodorow's signal study *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), taking its cue from psychoanalytic object relations theory, argues that in our culture girls' relationships with their mothers are more intense, ambivalent, and lingering than those with their fathers. Because she is nurtured by a parent of the same sex, a daughter retains her mother as primary object throughout adolescence and into adulthood. This helps perpetuate the division of labor in our society: although theoretically both girls and boys are psychologically capable of mothering, both having after all *been* mothered, only girls in fact do it. Hence the "reproduction" of mothering—its continuation from mother to daughter. Chodorow carefully distinguishes psychological processes of reproduction from role training or intentional socialization:

In an industrial late capitalist society, "socialization" is a particularly psychological affair. . . . Whether or not men in particular or society at large—through media, income distribution, welfare policies, and schools—enforce women's mothering, and expect or require a woman to care for her child, they cannot require or force her to provide adequate parenting unless she, *to some degree and on some unconscious or conscious level*, has the capacity and sense of self as maternal to do so. [32–33]

According to Chodorow, mothering in our culture is part of an economic system that contributes to sexual inequality and that relies above all on internalized gender distinctions.

Part of the fascination of *Charlotte's Web* comes from its insertion of a male into the chain of mothering among the book's females. The novel offers an innovative picture of mothering that seems to belie internalized gender distinctions and to suggest that males are indeed as capable of mothering as females. Moreover, whereas Chodorow seems to slight the importance of physiology, *Charlotte's Web*

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subtly allows physical mothering to share the focus with psychological mothering, enhancing the complexity of the depiction. Yet significant differences between male and female mothering, coupled with the pressure of gender stereotypes in the narrative, suggest a reading of the novel that supports Chodorow's assertions about mothering as a psychological activity of females. This reading also raises important questions about gender and mothering in our culture and about the influence of a work of literature—especially a work of children's literature—on our attitudes toward them.<sup>1</sup>

The first transmission of mothering appears in the opening pages of the book. Having saved the life of a runt piglet, whom she names Wilbur, Fern learns from her mother how to care for her new charge:

Mrs. Arable found a baby's nursing bottle and a rubber nipple. She poured warm milk into the bottle, fitted the nipple over the top, and handed it to Fern. "Give him his breakfast," she said.

A minute later, Fern was seated on the floor in the corner of the kitchen with her infant between her knees, teaching it to suck from the bottle. [5–7]

There could hardly be a more graphic example of the reproduction of mothering than this. Here and in the following pages, Fern's relationship to Wilbur typifies the initial phase of the mutual involvement and identification between mother and child: they worship each other. Fern thinks it is a "blissful world" because she has "entire charge of a pig"; she gets up early in the morning to feed him and rushes home from school to fix another bottle for him, and when she watches him in the straw, "it relieved her mind to know that her baby would sleep covered up, and would stay warm" (9). For his part, Wilbur gazes at Fern "with adoring eyes" and follows her everywhere. Throughout this phase, feeding and touch are of the utmost importance in mothering. Both elements are essential for an infant's primary narcissism, which Wilbur experiences fully: "Every day was a happy day, and every night was peaceful" (11).

But mothering relationships are essentially asymmetrical. As Chodorow notes, a child's relationship to its mother is exclusive, whereas a mother's to her child is informed by many other concerns. Fern must go to school, leaving Wilbur behind each day, and eventually she must send Wilbur to the Zuckerman farm. This par-

tial separation causes Wilbur his first anxiety: "He didn't feel like going to sleep, he didn't feel like digging, he was tired of standing still, tired of lying down. 'I'm less than two months old and I'm tired of living,' he said" (16). His loneliness overcomes him often, and he feels "friendless, dejected, and hungry" because his needs for touch and food are no longer so easily gratified.

Wilbur remains aware of Fern, knowing "she was sitting there, right outside his pen" (16). She has become his internalized object, associated with food and touch, the "first" mother that always exists somewhere in our unconscious. The shift in the narrative structure at this point in the book expresses this subtle relationship very well. Fern gradually disappears from Wilbur's conscious life to be replaced often by food, especially milk, but the blissful combination of food and touch exists for him now only in Mrs. Zuckerman's buttermilk baths. Fern's withdrawal causes him pain and may puzzle some readers (especially when at the end of the book she goes off with Henry Fussy), but it is psychologically essential both for Fern and for Wilbur.<sup>2</sup> Fern must develop her own outside interests, just as her own mother has done, and though they frustrate the child's desire to re-create its first intimacy and sense of merging, they are essential if the child is to form a self—that is, an identity separate from the mother (Chodorow 70–71, 79–80).

As Fern recedes from mother figure to internalized object, Charlotte the spider takes over the mothering of Wilbur—a different form of mothering. Charlotte and Wilbur never touch each other, and Charlotte never feeds Wilbur. She accomplishes her mothering solely through language. She advises, scolds, compliments, sings lullabies, tells stories, and finally weaves words into her web—attentions Wilbur accepts passively at first. Indeed, the novel's references to Charlotte and Wilbur as "friends" probably results from the absence of touch and feeding in their relationship, but Charlotte is no less a mother object.

Their meeting begins pleasantly enough, with Wilbur thinking Charlotte "beautiful" and Charlotte agreeing. Soon, however, she is capturing and devouring a fly in her web and explaining her actions in detail to Wilbur, who watches "in horror." Describing her insect diet, she says she loves to "drink their blood." She adds, "My mother was a trapper before me. Her mother was a trapper before her," and notes further that "the first spider in the early days of the world" was female (39–40). Wilbur, after all this, finds her "fierce, brutal,

scheming, bloodthirsty. . . . How can I learn to like her?" This new mother offers love and acceptance, but also danger and risk. Can he trust her as he has trusted Fern? Charlotte evokes the child's accession to ambivalence: "When a person's early experience tells him or her that only one unique person can provide emotional gratifications—a realistic expectation when they have been intensely and exclusively mothered—the desire to recreate that experience has to be ambivalent" (Chodorow 79). The text emphasizes Charlotte's indulgent fondness for Wilbur: she expresses affection for him, makes plans for his future, tells him she likes him best when he is "not a quitter," scolds his extravagant behavior, and tells him he is sensational. But the greatest threat a mother offers is abandonment. Like Fern, Charlotte gradually withdraws, becoming more interested in her egg sac and eventually more voice than physical presence. Here again, the text shows the asymmetry that marks our culture's form of mothering.

With Charlotte's death and Wilbur's acquisition of her egg sac, the reproduction of mothering shifts gender; now Wilbur mothers. Curiously, this moment also marks a shift in focus from postnatal to prenatal care. Wilbur rises to the demands of parenthood by sacrificing food to secure Templeton's help, protectively carrying the egg sac in his mouth (in imitation of gestation), scooping out a special place for it, guarding and warming it with his breath on cold nights.<sup>3</sup> He takes much pride and pleasure in all this: "Life is always a rich and steady time when you are waiting for something to happen or hatch" (176). This must be one of the most appealing moments in the book for children, who try to imagine what their mothers were like before they were born, since these internalized images of pregnancy reinforce the importance of their own birth and protection.

The sac containing Charlotte's babies also becomes a representation of oedipal desire. Wilbur had commented with pride earlier to Templeton, "She is going to become a mother. For your information there are 514 eggs in that peachy little sac." Immediately after this, the text tells us that Charlotte and Wilbur were "glad to be rid of" Templeton when he went to sleep (149). Wilbur's hyperbolic 514 babies not only occasion pride and possessiveness but totally diffuse any sibling rivalries. Moreover, while Wilbur ensures Charlotte's survival in her children, through those (female) children who stay with him he ensures his own survival as well.

Allied to this oedipal fantasy is the fantasy of redemption from death. Although psychoanalytic theory has not often addressed the issue in detail, it assumes that the desire to give birth occurs in both boys and girls, finding this desire "historically older" than the phallic stage and marked especially in the male by a strong unconscious fear of death (Jacobson 144–45). The text astutely uses a pig to express this fear, since our culture keeps pigs solely to slaughter and eat them and thus justifies Wilbur's fear. More interestingly, the child's desire to give birth "even seems to reflect, at first, only the mother-child situation without involving fantasies about the relationship between the parents" (Jacobson 141). The fantasy reproduction in this text is asexual: Charlotte has no visible male partner. This is an infantile fantasy for both boys and girls, though Chodorow suggests it may be stronger and more complex in girls. "On a less conscious, object-relational level, having a child recreates the desired mother-child exclusivity for a woman, and interrupts it for a man. . . . These differences hold also on the level of sexual and biological fantasy and symbolism" (Chodorow 201).

Once the spiders hatch, Wilbur's mothering differs even further from that by the females. He does name the spiders as Fern named him, and he mothers with words, as Charlotte did. Fern and Charlotte, however, move on to other kinds of lives, Charlotte to reproduction and Fern to adolescence. Wilbur, by contrast, at the end of the book has returned to essentially the same state he was in at the beginning: basking in the daily care of the Zuckermans, the companionship of the other animals, and the completely undemanding "friendship" of the little female spiders. For him, life "was very good—night and day, winter and summer, spring and fall, dull days and bright days. It was the best place to be" (183). Moreover, although he loves Charlotte's children and grandchildren, none of them "ever quite took her place in his heart" (184). Wilbur's "mother," loving and dangerous, remains his dominant attachment.

Wilbur's mothering, then, differs from Mrs. Arable's, Fern's, and Charlotte's in the degree of its grounding in infantile fantasy. It represents unusually complicated wish fulfillment: oedipal desire for the mother, participation in pregnancy, asexual reproduction, exaggerated multiple birth, redemption from death, a continuing dependent and narcissistic state, assurance that such a state will never end, and finally the maintenance of the mother as primary

love object. Mothering in females can also represent such wish fulfillment, but in this book Wilbur provides the focus for it. His condition at the end of the book reflects the fundamental asymmetry of daily reproduction: "Men are socially and psychologically reproduced by women, but women are reproduced (or not) largely by themselves" (Chodorow 36). The little spiders, all females, reproduce themselves generation after generation; Wilbur's life has been entirely reproduced by the females around him.

Chodorow emphasizes that mothering is only one role that females play in our culture, albeit a major one and one strongly encouraged by the culture. But the end of *Charlotte's Web* suggests that mothering is the only active role that Wilbur will ever play in life. Having re-created his exclusive primary attachment to his mother, he needs to do nothing further. This is certainly powerful fantasy material, for child and adult readers of both sexes, but if Wilbur's maleness was significant in his mothering duties, it must also be significant in this ending. The final image of him in the comfortable barn, childlike and happy, comes very close to the stereotype of the childlike, dependent husband. The difference is that Wilbur does not fear this state of dependency, as Chodorow suggests many men do (199).

The novel depicts other male stereotypes as well, and much less pleasant ones. The first three pages of the book equate maleness with violence: Mr. Arable is about to kill the pig with an ax, and Avery, Fern's ten-year-old brother, appears "heavily armed—an air rifle in one hand, a wooden dagger in the other" (4). Mr. Arable's reason for the slaughter is that "a weakling makes trouble." Though he seems "almost ready to cry" when Fern protests the killing, he says, "I'll let you start it on a bottle, like a baby. Then you'll see what trouble a pig can be" (3)—the implication being that babies and weaklings are equal in their potential to make trouble. Avery's mother says her son is perfectly normal because he "gets into poison ivy and gets stung by wasps and bees and brings frogs and snakes home and breaks everything he lays his hands on. He's fine" (111–12).

Templeton, the only other male character who appears with regularity, is a shifty, greedy male and Wilbur's rival for food.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Dorian, who does allow the possibility of animal speech and thus speaks for the power of the imagination, nonetheless reinforces gender stereotypes with his patriarchal advice; his response to Mrs.

Arable's complaint about Avery getting stung by wasps and bringing home snakes and breaking everything is a resounding and unequivocal "Good!" (112). The choice of the name Henry Fussy for the male who woos Fern seems calculated to make him less than attractive. It is also worth noting that Wilbur has no perceptible father.

By contrast, *Charlotte's Web* contains an unusual number of nurturing female characters. Some of them are as stereotyped as the men: the goose, Mrs. Arable, and Mrs. Zuckerman with her cleansing (and to Wilbur delicious) buttermilk baths all tend to express stereotypical attitudes and behavior. Even Fern's attitudes do not quite escape the stereotype, especially as she moves into adolescence. But the sheer number of different mothers, of varying species, and all circulating around Wilbur, suggests the complexity of the mother image itself: a biological, psychological, spiritual, economic, social, and cultural construct which eludes full description and for which Charlotte's web is the perfect emblem:

[Charlotte said,] "Not many creatures can spin webs. Even men aren't as good at it as spiders, although they *think* they're pretty good, and they'll *try* anything. Did you ever hear of the Queensborough Bridge?"

Wilbur shook his head. "Is it a web?"

"Sort of," replied Charlotte. "But do you know how long it took men to build it? Eight whole years. . . . I can make a web in a single evening."

"But what do people catch in the Queensborough Bridge—bugs?"

"They don't catch anything. They just keep trotting back and forth across the bridge thinking there is something better on the other side . . . with men it's rush, rush, every minute. . . . I know a good thing when I see it, and my web is a good thing."  
[60–61]

In Charlotte's eyes, a bridge is a bipolar thing allowing only two directions: back and forth. And while "men" may refer to human beings in general, Charlotte continually uses the masculine pronoun in a derogatory way here. A web, on the other hand, is a natural product allowing complex interactions in many directions; it represents the female Charlotte herself and her nurturing activities.

Drawing upon Chodorow's findings, Carol Gilligan has further explored the symbol of the web to represent women's notions of relationships; in her theory, women perceive relationships as a complex network of responsibility. They therefore often score poorly on psychological tests to elicit moral attitudes that are oriented toward a hierarchical image of relationships, for which an accurate image is the ladder. Each of these images—web and ladder—"distorts the other's representation. As the top of the hierarchy becomes the edge of the web and as the center of the network of connection becomes the middle of a hierarchical progression, each image marks as dangerous the place which the other defines as safe" (Gilligan 62). Males tend to fear being caught in a web of relationship and often respond to this possibility with fantasies of violence (39–42). Women, by contrast, fear being alone at the top of a hierarchy without the network of support which reproduces them (43–44).

Charlotte, however, knows no fear. As confident in the center of her web as she is at the top of the hierarchy of the barnyard animals, she escapes female stereotyping by combining masculine with feminine traits. Her scheming, trapping, bloodthirsty nature coexists with peaceful nurturance. The text describes her as "bold" and "cruel" (41), yet she draws support from her relationships with her female ancestors, her cousins, Wilbur, and the other animals. Language, in the dichotomy between nature and culture, is usually associated with culture and hence with maleness. Yet Charlotte is both "a good friend and a good writer" (184). Janice Alberghene has described the importance of writing in *Charlotte's Web*, noting that Charlotte teaches Wilbur about language and its use by weaving words as she weaves her web. Just as language is frequently tied to male culture, weaving allies itself with the female (see especially Rowe). But Charlotte breaks down these dichotomies, incorporating in one body, and in her web, the nurturing voice of the female and the cultural voice of the male. She becomes, virtually, the perfect parent.

This valorization of motherhood is one of the most appealing aspects of *Charlotte's Web* and encourages a reading in which gender distinctions are erased. However, just as Wilbur's maleness cannot be entirely ignored, so Charlotte's femaleness is stressed throughout the book and remains central to her nurturing. From this point of view, the novel supports Chodorow's contention that our culture socializes women to become mothers based on psychological as

well as physical criteria—that is, by emphasizing internalized gender distinctions. In *Charlotte's Web* the reproduction of mothering, despite a male's temporary participation, remains the province of the female.

The phenomenal popularity of *Charlotte's Web* in this country was recently confirmed by a "Reading Is Fundamental" survey, which asked eighty "celebrities" and nearly 750,000 schoolchildren to name their favorite children's book. *Charlotte's Web* scored high among the children, and celebrities Ann Landers and Erma Bombeck (who "mother" thousands through the popular press) named it as their special favorite, as did numerous teachers, librarians, and parents who are RIF volunteers (*Greenville News* 2A). Such widespread popularity indicates that the depiction of motherhood in this book corresponds to the desires and fantasies of a large and varied population, who find in it much that is comforting. This comforting quality raises questions, though, about gender and nurturing in our culture today.

Wilbur's passivity at the end of the book certainly provides a comforting fantasy—especially for a child reader, since it implies that happiness and peace need not be associated solely with maturity and action or with the evolving gender distinctions that seem to accompany maturity. But it also implies the possibility of replicating the mother-child bond without involving a father and suggests that, while the female nurturing characters in the book must grow and change, the chief male one need not. Chodorow believes that such a fantasy would not be disturbing to girls, since girls do not define themselves by denying pre-oedipal relational modes (167). Boys, however, must relinquish those modes to achieve mature masculinity. What is the effect of such a literary fantasy, then, on boys? It would be interesting to discover if *Charlotte's Web* affects boys differently from girls.<sup>5</sup>

Charlotte's complexity and the valorization of motherhood through her and her web must certainly provide comfort and even inspiration to readers, especially female ones. Moreover, this book focuses entirely on the domestic sphere, where the world of men gives way to women—to women's use of language and women's relationships. Furthermore, the main character, a male, is central to the web of the text because he is central to the web of female relationships that structure it. However, Chodorow reminds us of social realities in our culture: "Women's mothering determines women's primary location in the domestic sphere and creates a basis for the

structural differentiation of domestic and public spheres. But these spheres operate hierarchically. Kinship rules organize claims of men on domestic units, and men dominate kinship. Culturally and politically, the public sphere dominates the domestic, and hence men dominate women" (10). The women seem dominant in this novel; yet their power reaches only a little beyond the domestic (to the county fair) and Mrs. Arable must turn to an unmistakably patriarchal figure, Dr. Dorian, for advice about her daughter's imagination. Thus, while the fantasy of the novel seems to valorize motherhood, it does so within a tightly controlled domain. Might this subtle aspect of such a popular novel not in some way contribute to keeping women in the domestic sphere?

Finally, the stereotypes in the book also offer both positive and negative comfort. Readers may smile at Avery's foolishness in acting like a pig, or at Mrs. Arable's narrow-minded equation of crocheting with web-spinning, or at her encouragement of Henry Fussy's attentions to Fern, recognizing that such behavior is only part of the truth. Indeed, these stereotypes emerge so clearly in *Charlotte's Web* because they are juxtaposed with the unstereotypical behavior of Wilbur and Charlotte. But even in as fine and complex a novel as this, stereotypes may feed fears. For example, do the characters of the "heavily armed" Avery, the ax-carrying Mr. Arable, and the devouring Templeton reflect women's fear of men's potential for violence? How might boys react to hearing such depictions read to them by their female teachers or mothers? If this novel suggests that men are indeed capable of mothering, might not such accompanying depictions, especially in a children's book, delay societal and personal changes? Given the remarkable dissemination of this novel across ages, races, and classes in this country, these are significant questions.

*Charlotte's Web* has the power to affect readers deeply on many issues. Relatively few people will read Nancy Chodorow, but *Charlotte's Web* anticipated her exploration of gender and motherhood with its complex interweaving of stereotype and innovation, depicting motherhood as both a biological and a psychological process that rests, in our culture, finally with the female. In so doing, it has provided various forms of comfort for countless readers. As our society tries to break down gender distinctions with regard to nurturing, however, the underlying gender distinctions that inform this novel take on even greater importance. They are not a mere relic of 1952, when the novel first appeared, but, as Chodorow shows, a

sign of something deeply ingrained, unconscious, and thus all the more powerful in us. They cannot be overcome until they are recognized—especially in as fine and influential a book as *Charlotte's Web*.

#### Notes

1. In this essay, I treat *Charlotte's Web* as a text; addressing questions of psycho-biography would entail a different psychoanalytic approach, but the authorship of this hymn to motherhood by a male, E. B. White, would provide the focus for an interesting study in itself.

2. Perry Nodelman describes this shift from "innocence" to "experience" as one from naturalism to fantasy (126). The two-part structure is not pure, though; later sections in the novel are in the "naturalistic" mode. Object relations theory helps us see both why Fern must be encouraged by her mother to develop a "normal" interest in boys (104–11) in naturalistic passages and how she remains an internalized mother for Wilbur at the point of transition to the fantastic.

3. From an anthropological point of view, such male activity is not unusual, of course. Many cultures practice various forms of couvade, and the rite is regarded as a useful, even essential element in the birth process. Until recently, modern Western culture denied men such rites and fantasies, reducing them to pacing in the hospital waiting room.

4. Young readers' enjoyment of Templeton may in part be explained psycho-analytically: while Wilbur remains generally in the oral stage, Templeton with his hoarding and overconsumption is a much more anal character. Wilbur eats, but Templeton devours. Young children are chronologically and psychologically much closer to their own anality than most adults and thus less likely to find it unattractive.

5. It would also be interesting to discover whether *Charlotte's Web* is more or less popular among boys than girls. In the RIF survey, the book was named by children as a favorite "along with other books." No male celebrity cited in the article named the book, but the "teachers, librarians, and parents" who are RIF volunteers named the book overwhelmingly as a favorite. That the "great majority" of these volunteers are female is confirmed by a phone conversation with RIF headquarters (June 27, 1989).

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