



# Female's Elegy under Phallogentrism: Tragic Connotations of Three Modes of Maternal Filicide in Western Literature

**Wenqing Shao**

School of language and literature, Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai), Weihai 264209, Shandong, China

DOI: 10.32629/asc.v3i1.692

---

**Abstract:** Maternal filicide, the murder of a child by a mother, is a multifaceted phenomenon with complexity. This paper explores the motif of maternal filicide and divides it in Western literature into three categories according to the mode, that is, revenge, compassion and redemption mode, respectively represented by three typical mothers (Medea, Abbie and Seth). By comparing their reason and pattern, their tragedies under Phallogentrism are further analyzed. On this basis, it is pointed out that maternal filicide incarnates female's failure in Phallogentric context because of female subject's self-alienation, female predicament, and incapability to get rid of the fate of being dependent on the patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** maternal filicide, "mother killing child" motif, Phallogentrism

---

## Introduction

Mothers are always thought to be the embodiment of love, there are some pagan, however. The phenomenon of maternal filicide, the "mother killing child" is one of the most tragic ones, which unfolds a perverse and abnormal side of mothers.

In Western literature maternal filicide is a significant motif in different genres. For instance, in drama, Euripides' Medea, Shakespeare's Macbeth, Goethe's Faust, and O'Neill's Desire under the Elms in drama; In novel, Walter Scott's Central Lothian, George Eliot's Adam Bede, John Updike's Run rabbit, Toni Morrison's Beloved and so on. But this phenomenon has rarely been studied. Lillian Cauty once said: "The reference to this heinous behaviour in literature poses a particular conundrum for literary criticism." Besides, previous studies are predominantly case studies, lacking a systematical and comprehensive analysis around this motif. In addition, the mothers are mostly regarded as "A flag of female awakening" from feminist perspective while being overlooked their tragic connotation under Phallogentrism.

This paper addresses these gap by summarizing maternal filicide in Western literature into three groups: "revenge-mode", "compassion-mode", and "redemption-mode". By comparing and analyzing their pattern of filicide, this paper puts the mothers in the context of Phallogentrism, reinterpreting them to excavate more profound tragic connotation.

## 1. "Mother killing child" motif and literary types in Western literature

### 1.1 Motif of "mother killing children"

Maternal filicide, or "mother killing child", is defined as child murder by the mother. Many classifications have been elaborated based on underlying motives such as altruism, mental pathology, fatal maltreatment, spousal revenge, or an unwanted child. In Western literature, the motif of "mother killing child" has been expressed by many writers in various forms as a prototype, therefore numerous texts have been generated, which can be categorized into three modes.

### 1.2 Three types under the motif

Concerning maternal filicide works, British scholar Josephine Lanner grouped them into two categories: "sympathetic narrative" and "salvific narrative" However, this approach ignores the vengeful mother represented by Medea. Therefore, on basis of Josephine McDonagh, this study divides them into three categories.

#### 1.2.1 Revenge-mode

This type refers to spouse revenge filicide, occurring when a mother kills her child specifically to emotionally harm her husband. Those vengeful mothers are not rare, especially in ancient Greek and Roman literature.

Medea's story is the most representative one. Medea adapted by Euripides from Greek mythology remains the earliest prototype of "filicide for revenge" motif. Princess Medea of Colchis fanatically falls in love with Jason who comes to steal the golden fleece. After helping him, she goes to Greece to marry Jason, hoping to enjoy his everlasting love. Unexpectedly, Jason betrays her and marries the princess of Corinth. In a rage, Medea slays her children by herself to punish the faithless

husband.

"The primary trigger for these mothers to contemplate or commit the act of filicide...was the experience of being abandoned by a male lover or spouse..." This sexual desertion, and then substitution by, another "better" woman as wife is at the core of Medea's retaliatory actions. "Such betrayal is closely linked to the woman's sense of shame at being abandoned and can lead to a particularly dangerous, even homicidal, type of narcissistic rage: a number of recent psychological studies highlight the central role played by shame and narcissism in violent behaviour" She cannot suppress her wounded pride torturing her —"I will not let my enemies laugh at me" — and a sense of divine justice — "The gods and I / devised this strategy" — to punish Jason.

### **1.2.2 Compassion-mode**

In this mode, women and children are mostly victims of male, being lured, used and enslaved in plenty ways. Maternal filicides in *Rabbit, Run*, *Adam Bede*, and *Desire under the Elms* are included in this category.

The most representative one exists in *Desire under the Elms* written by O'Neill. In the play, Abbie marries Cabot for the security of life. In order to give birth to a son to achieve the goal, she seduces Eben, over time, however, her attraction to Eben evolves into true love. She kills her child to declare her devotion to Eben.

Abbie kills the baby herself to prove her love, "(distractedly) He won't steal! I'd kill him fast! I do love ye! I'll prove t' ye...". How could she not love the child, out of maternal instinct? She cries "(slowly and brokenly) I didn't want t' do it. I hated myself fur doin' it. I loved him. He was so purty--dead spit 'n' image o' yew." So, her killing also shows love completely overturns her previous materialistic pursuit, and it is a head-on attack against the money worshipers represented by the old Cabot. Her desire transcends the physical realm, and thus the act of killing child can arouse sympathy.

### **1.2.3 Redemption-mode**

This kind of child killing stories are often seen in black literature. Most of the "redeemable" mothers show the spirit of black mothers fighting against the sinful slavery with tragic endings, of which *Beloved* is typical.

Seth, a black mother, is a slave in a Kentucky plantation named Sweet Home. She cannot tolerate the abuse and brutality, so she resolutely runs away. However, when the slave owner comes after her, Seth kills her child, *Beloved*, in order to protect her.

Differently, Seth's filicide roots in the deepest love for her daughter. "I have taken my treasures to safety," Seth says. She would not accept the fate of her children being dictated by white men. *Beloved's* death did put an end to the slave owner's attempts to take them back.

To sum up, Medea, Abbie and Seth staged different tragedies through different modes of maternal filicide. They are all resolute and courageous, not to compromise in the face of external social oppression, even though the outcome is destructive. Their filicide, on the one hand, shows the courage of women to pursue freedom, happiness and dignity of life, on the other hand, indicts the unreasonable patriarchy and slavery. In the context of Phallogocentrism, the tragic connotation is more profound.

## **2. Maternal filicide under Phallogocentrism**

The motif of maternal filicide in Western literature reflects the resistance and destruction of female as "other" against the discourse of male's power, the Phallogocentrism.

Phallus, a symbol of fecundity and creativity, occupies a central position in Freud's psychoanalysis and is used to define the differences between men and women. This idea is further reinforced in Lacan's symbolic order, which is not only a set of meaning system, but also a discourse system. Derrida called such a system "Phallogocentrism". "It is a patriarchal world, because here Phallus is the symbol of the positive, self-identical truth, which is unchallenged."

Therefore, under Phallogocentrism, the position of women is to bear the responsibility of delivering children and taking care of the family, deprived of any right of self-choice and self-realization. In such context, although Medea, Abbie and Seth have different types of maternal filicides to rebel, they all together show the tragic connotation suffered by Phallogocentrism.

## **3. The tragic connotations under Phallogocentrism**

### **3.1 Self-alienation**

In Medea's case, children are regarded as the continuation of the father's bloodline, while the mother is only the father's "negative incubator of seeds" Medea, who is known as an awakening feminist, actually fully accepted the role of being an "negative incubator of seed" and used it as an excuse for atrocities. Moreover, maternal filicide is the negation of motherhood, distortion as well as alienation of human nature for women who kill their children. Their efforts of self-examination and change in the context of Phallogocentrism is also noted to be deformed. The same is true of Abbie and Seth. It

is quite paradoxical that the first step for women to return to themselves is actually self-alienation or self-destruction.

### 3.2 Plight of female

Furthermore, it highlights the plight of women. Filicide is immoral, but it is the only way for women to break out hedge of Phallus, in which men are endowed with absolute superiority, leadership in social system, public opinion, economy and other aspects. Medea is a princess, but once she becomes an abandoned wife, she loses her family and goes to her country with nothing. Jason is despised for his unfaithfulness, but no one doubts him. If Medea and Abbie are facing a strong patriarchal society, Seth has to face not only gender issues, but more importantly, the pressure from racial discrimination. Considering the perspective, however, this paper will not discuss the plight of women under slavery in detail.

### 3.3 Fate to be dependant

Medea's powerful chariot does not lead her down a new path that is different from the traditional path of female life — freedom and independence, which is still a path of no return: eternal attachment to men. She is a descendant of the God of Sun, the "Princess of Colchean", but staying dependent of her father's family reveals the strong attachment. When she marries Jason, her aura disappears in the thin air. After the betrayal, in despair, she cries out "I am don!" because the more Medea clings to Jason, the stronger her hatred would be. In this way, her tragedy can therefore be interpreted as the revenge taken by women in their desperation to seek male attachment.

Abbie is attached to Eben so much that she could do anything for him and could not live without him. When he learns that Abbie cheats him, he curses his lover and his own son to die together, and even abandons them. Desperate to retain his love, Abbie committes an unpardonable crime. She succumbs to libido, succumbs to love, and finally becomes a willing male's appendage.

## Conclusion

Through comparative studies and systematic induction of maternal filicide in Western literature, the paper finds that the "mother killing children" motif can be categorized into three distinctive types. The first type is the avenger mother who slays in characterized by killing children to punish her husband. The second is mothers at loss, whether in a state of unconsciousness or for a sympathetic reason. The third one consists a deep maternal love hard to understand — killing for protection and redemption of her children. All of those seemingly progressive efforts are of great tragic meanings under the context of Phallescencrism due to self-alienation, unconverted plight and fate to be appendage.

## References

---

- [1] L.Corti. *The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- [2] Raymond S, Ducasse MV, Azoulay M, Gasman I. Maternal filicide and mental illness: A descriptive study of 17 women hospitalized in a French secure unit over a 24-year period. *J Forensic Sci*. 2021;66(5):1818-1828. doi: 10.1111/1556-4029.14780. Epub 2021 Jun 30. PMID: 34196016.
- [3] Josephine Mcdonagh. Child-Murder Narratives in George Eliot' s *Adam Bede*:Embedded Histories and Fictional Representation. *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 2001;56(2):228-59.
- [4] Cyrino, Monica Silveira. When Grief Is Gain: The Psychodynamics of Abandonment and Filicide in Euripides' 'Medea'. *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 31, no. 1, Penn State University Press, 1996, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1316766>.
- [5] Scheff, Thomas J. *Emotions and Violence: Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts*. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1991.
- [6] "Desire under the Elms by Eugene O'Neill Pdf Read Online Free - Page 30." Booksvooks.com,booksvooks.com/scrollablehtml/desire-under-the-elms-pdf-eugene-oneill.html?page=30. Accessed 20 Feb. 2022.
- [7] "Desire under the Elms by Eugene O'Neill Pdf Read Online Free - Page 31." Booksvooks.com,booksvooks.com/scrollablehtml/desire-under-the-elms-pdf-eugene-oneill.html?page=31. Accessed 20 Feb. 2022.