

What Happened to Mother?

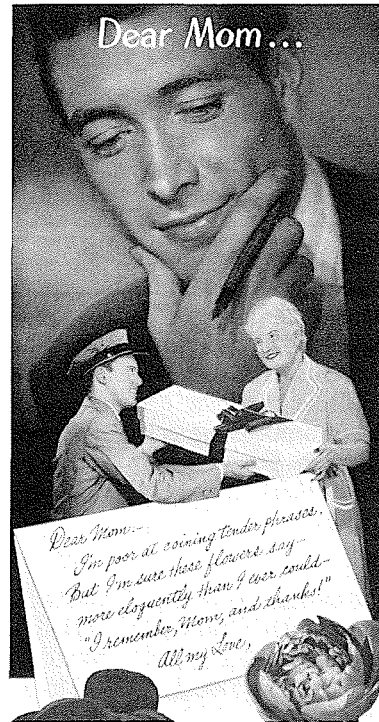
“It was a place apart, a walled garden, in which certain virtues too easily crushed by modern life could be preserved,” historian Walter Houghton wrote of the idealized Victorian home. At the center of this earthly sanctuary reigned the figure of the loving mother. The English poet Coventry Patmore dubbed her “The Angel in the House,” and with the revival of chivalry in 19th-century Britain and America, her standing was even further enhanced. Celebrating Mother’s Day was not enough. A son’s duty, according to this domestic version of the knightly code, was not merely to obey but to revere his mother. But as Paul Fussell here explains, the sacrosanct image of Mother, like many another 19th-century ideal, began to lose its luster amid the horrors of the First World War.

by Paul Fussell

To the traditional Anglo-American male imagination in the late-19th century, it was taken for granted that one’s attitude toward one’s mother should be conspicuously chivalric, if not reverential. It was axiomatic not only that Mother Knows Best, but—more startling—that A Boy’s Best Friend Is His Mother.

Wherever you went, Mother was likely to go too, safeguarding your chastity, making sure you were protected from the evils of drink and tobacco and low friendships. And from Mother’s omnipresence you suffered no loss of manliness. When Douglas MacArthur arrived at West Point as a cadet in 1899, he was attended by Mother. She lived there for four years as self-appointed moral-tutor-in-residence, scrutinizing his every move, praising or blaming him as appropriate. And when, commissioned a

This 1952 florists' advertisement urged sons to "send flowers by wire" on Mother's Day. This practice remains so prevalent that some ascribe the invention of Mother's Day (the second Sunday in May) to the florist industry. In fact, the idea began with a school teacher, Anna Reeves Jarvis, in 1908.



second lieutenant, he proceeded to his first post (in San Francisco with the Corps of Engineers), she accompanied him. In England at about the same time, Lord Northcliffe, the newspaper magnate, was revealing by his extravagant devotion to his mother how deeply he was dyed in the style of the period. His mother he always called "darling," while his wife was only "dear." On his deathbed, his last coherent words were, "Tell Mother she is the only one."

In such an atmosphere, it was to be expected that mothers would not just demand their due but would seize all the power they could grasp. Franklin D. Roosevelt's mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, would be found to be a terrible person by any civilized standard. She was ignorant, intolerant, and opinionated, uneducated but assertive, anti-Semitic and snobbish, a lifetime practitioner of the *libido dominandi*, and she visited her tyranny on anyone she could cow. Her favorite victim was Franklin's wife, but Franklin himself was by no means safe from her bullying and nosiness. When he went to Harvard, she quite naturally moved into an apartment in Cambridge, where for the full four years she kept the customary motherly eye on him. She never willingly yielded her prerogatives to meddle and interfere. According to Ted Morgan, one of Roosevelt's biographers, Betsy Cushing, his daughter-in-law, was once in his office with him when

the secretary of state telephoned. As she remembers, Roosevelt picked up the phone and said, "Oh yes, Cordell."

She pointed at herself and silently mouthed, "Shall I go?" and FDR shook his head. Then he said, "Mama, will you please get off the line—Mama, I can hear you breathing, will you *please* get off the line?"

You sometimes see a photograph of a sad-faced Roosevelt at his desk just after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He is signing the Congressional Declaration of War, and on his left jacket sleeve he wears a black mourning band. Captions on this picture sometimes assert that by this traditional token he is mourning the deaths of the 2,000 men killed on December 7, 1941. Not at all. He is mourning his mother, who died three months before. The erroneous captions measure the speed with which we have moved past the traditional usages, especially those associated with the overpowering devotion to Mother.

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To realize the oddity of this canonization of Mother, the historian of ideas and styles must try to imagine it flourishing during the Renaissance or the 18th century. It clearly belongs only to the 19th and to its afterglow in the earlier part of the 20th. Mother is "the noblest thing alive," said Coleridge in 1818. And once Queen Victoria matured into motherhood, her image as patriotic totem and head of the Established Church doubtless added a weight more than trivially sentimental to the mother cult. It was during her reign that it became popular to domesticate Britannia, formerly imagined as a rather threatening classical warrior, by designating her "Mother Britain." (It is impossible today to envisage or delineate a noble, allegorical Britannia. She has suffered a fate similar to the demeaning of the female "America" referred to in the GI graffiti in the Saigon latrine: AMERICA LOST HER VIRGINITY IN VIETNAM, to which a later hand has added: YES, AND SHE CAUGHT THE CLAP TOO.)

And it was just after Victoria's reign that the mother fixation attained an additional ritualizing, at least in the United States, when in 1908 a new holiday, Mother's Day, was devised—by florists, the cynical said. The creation of this special day rapidly gave birth to symbolic floral conven-

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tions, such as sons wearing a white or red carnation to proclaim their homage to Mother whether dead or alive.

The soldiers of 1914–1918 began the war with their traditional imaginations intact, and it seemed wholly appropriate that their main visitors at their training camps should be not girlfriends, mistresses, or even wives, but mothers. It is not surprising that a Civil War song was revived for this later occasion, a song requiring the singer to announce, "Just before the battle, Mother, I am thinking most of you." The prevailing Victorian attitudes toward Mother are readily available in a little book produced by the Reverend Dr. L. M. Zimmerman, the Methodist pastor of Christ Church, Baltimore, titled *Echoes from the Distant Battlefield*, issued in 1920. Zimmerman had corresponded copiously with his boy-soldier parishioners during the war, and in his book he selected high-minded chivalric passages from their letters to him. Hardly a one neglects to deliver "period" encomiums to Mother. One soldier, commenting on the loneliness in camp on Sundays, says, "One longs to see . . . his best friend, his mother, God bless her." And introducing a letter from a hospitalized soldier, Zimmerman points out—the parallelism seems significant—that "His Mother and his God are his very first thoughts." Many of Zimmerman's correspondents emphasize that only the principles of chastity enjoined by Mother have kept them pure abroad, amid the numerous temptations incident to residence in Latin countries.

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Indeed, the ultimate monitor and gauge of perfect purity is Mother. "Don't use language your mother would blush to hear," the American soldier is adjured by a YMCA pamphlet of 1918. And it is assumed as too obvious for discussion that the main sufferers in the war are by no means the soldiers in the cold and deadly line, but the mothers at home. Their *sacrifice*—the word was used freely—was recognized by the more traditional minded of their sons as even greater than the one required of them. "GIVE YOUR SONS," commands one preconscription pamphlet issued by the British Mothers' Union. It goes on to invoke chivalric images, casting Mother now in the role formerly played by the knight's courtly mistress. "The right sort of Mother for Old England," says this pamphlet, must gird the armor on her son "just as truly as the ladies of old braced on the armor of their knights." And no one seemed to doubt a mother's ability to override her son's instinctive pacifism or her capacity to deliver him up to the services on call. One mother depicted on a U.S. Navy recruiting poster resolutely presents her boy to Uncle Sam with the words, "Here he is, Sir." Mother's coercive power is similarly recognized in a British recruiting leaflet shrewdly addressed not to sons but to their mothers: "MOTHERS!" this leaflet asserts, "One word from YOU and he will go." Likewise, a British poster shows a white-haired mother with her hand on her son's shoulder. He looks uncertainly into the distance, but she gestures thither-

U. S. NAVY



A World War I recruiting poster.

**"Here he is, Sir."
We need him and you too!
Navy Recruiting Station**

ward broadly, saying to him, "GO! IT'S YOUR DUTY, LAD. JOIN TODAY." Did the British recruiting slogan say, "Every single one is ready to carry a gun"? No, it said, "Every mother's son is ready to carry a gun."

The conservative poet Alfred Noyes, writing for the government on behalf of the war effort, visited a munitions factory in September 1916, as the gruesome Somme battle in France was beginning to wear itself out. In the armaments factories, Noyes insisted, there was no labor trouble whatever, as the troops frequently believed. Indeed, the affection of the workers (many of them women) for their work can be described only as motherly. The women Noyes saw working, he reports, as they heaved "great shells into the shaping machines" or pulled "red-hot copper bands from furnaces, . . . seemed to lavish all the passion of motherhood upon their work; for this gleaming brood of shells, rank after rank, had indeed been brought forth to shield a dearer brood of flesh and blood. 'Mothers of the Army' was the thought that came to one's mind An army of little mothers"

Like other tenets of the chivalric code, this mother cult was going to suffer grave wartime damage. Before World War I, it would seem that the customary family quarrels popular in literature were with Father; Mother seemed to be protected by the codes of chivalric convention—privileged,

as it were. In books such as Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) and Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907), Mother is still sacrosanct, and it is Father who is exposed as an ignorant bully or a menace to the freedom of the young. But following the shocks and disillusionment of the Great War, satiric assaults upon Mother begin to recommend themselves to the new postwar audience. And despite the formal persistence of Mother's Day, the former adoration of Mother has scarcely weathered the scorn of such psychically damaged veterans as Ernest Hemingway, Erich Maria Remarque, and Robert Graves.

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Looking back over Hemingway's total production, one notices that although there are some fathers in it, such as "My Old Man," mothers are virtually absent. Indeed, the Hemingway hero, such as Jake Barnes or Frederic Henry, seems to belong to no family at all. But on the one occasion when a mother makes a conspicuous appearance in Hemingway's writing, she is ruthlessly anatomized and ridiculed. I have in mind the short story "Soldier's Home," published in Paris in 1924 in the volume *In Our Time*. Here, Harold Krebs, a Marine Corps corporal who has been through the bloodiest battles on the Western Front, returns badly shaken to his somnolent, incurious Midwestern town. (Some have identified it with Oak Park, Illinois, Hemingway's parents' home.) The gulf is deep and unbridgeable between his empirical knowledge of the war and his mother's sentimental image of it. For him, it has changed everything. For her, it has changed nothing, since to her mind it has been only a matter of received images and clichés, words about *gallantry* and *little Belgium*. For her, we find, the war has meant primarily a threat to Harold's chastity. She is disturbed now at his lassitude, his unwillingness to resume his prewar life as if nothing has happened:

"Have you decided what you are going to do yet, Harold?"
his mother said, taking off her glasses.

"No," said Krebs.

"Don't you think it's about time?"

"I hadn't thought about it," Krebs said.

"God has some work for everyone to do," his mother said.

"There can be no idle hands in His Kingdom."

"I'm not in His Kingdom," Krebs said.

"We are all of us in His Kingdom."

Krebs felt embarrassed and resentful

"I've worried about you so much, Harold," his mother went on. "I know the temptations you must have been exposed to. I know how weak men are"

After exhorting Harold to make something of himself and become a credit

to the community, his mother asks, "Don't you love your mother, dear boy?" In 1910 he would have answered, "Of course." Now he answers, "No." She collapses in tears, and he realizes that, having uttered the inexplicable postwar thing, he must make amends:

He went over and took hold of her arm. She was crying with her head in her hands.

"I didn't mean it," he said. "I was just angry at something. I didn't mean I didn't love you."

He manages to pacify her, whereupon she says, "I'm your mother . . . I held you next to my heart when you were a tiny baby." Before the war, this appeal might have reduced Harold to a subservient atonement, but now, we are told, "Krebs felt sick and vaguely nauseated." His mother invites him to kneel and pray with her. He declines. As he leaves the house he feels sorry for his mother, but he knows that soon he will have to leave home for good.

Equally unable to understand the way the war has changed everything for those who fought it is Paul Bäumer's mother in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). When Paul returns home to Germany on leave, he discovers that the only way the new world of the trenches, that is, the new world of industrialized mass violence, can greet the traditional one is by lies. "Was it very bad out there, Paul?" his mother asks, and, hating himself, he answers, "No, Mother, not so very." As he prepares to return to the front, she honors the prewar convention that one of a mother's main duties is preventing her son's access to sexual pleasure (or, once he is married, hating the agent of it). She says: "I would like to tell you to be on your guard against the women in France. They are no good." He informs her: "Where we are there aren't any women, Mother." Formerly the all-wise Boy's Best Friend, Mother has now turned into a hopelessly unimaginative, ignorant, sentimental drone and parasite.

And there's a similar mother, but a more dangerous one, in another important work of 1929, Graves's highly fictionalized memoir, *Good-bye to All That*. Here, the mother is a literary character devised by someone in the British propaganda services. He has denominated her "A Little Mother," and in a letter imputed to her, reprinted in a vastly popular pamphlet of 1916, she is made to reprehend any thought of a compromise peace by insisting that any such would be an insult to mothers who have already "sacrificed" their sons. Her bloodthirsty call for more war is accompanied by a train of solemn, illiterate testimonials from third-rate newspapers, noncombatant soldiers, and fictional bereaved mothers, one of whom is quoted as saying: "I have lost my two dear boys, but since I was shown the 'Little Mother's beautiful letter, a resignation too perfect to

describe has calmed all my aching sorrow, and I would now gladly give my sons twice over."

From these and similar exposures of maternal self-righteousness, callousness, and egotism the mother cult never recovered, and by the 1920s the cult had become one of the numerous casualties of the Victorian understanding of human rights and privileges. The British infantry veteran Charles Carrington has described the way the Great War was recalled in the disillusioned memoirs and novels of the late 1920s: "Every battle a defeat, every officer a nincompoop, every soldier a coward." And, we can add, every mother a monster.

Twenty more years would virtually complete the ruin of the chivalric mother, when Philip Wylie, in his wide-ranging satire *Generation of Vipers* (1942), stigmatized Mom and Momism as central signs, if not causes, of America's cultural backwardness and perpetual psychological adolescence. And by the time of the film *Midnight Cowboy*, in 1969, the mere display of Mother's picture in an easel frame in a hotel room constituted bad news.

Thus, the transition from the chivalric to the antichivalric, from romance to irony. The whole process, relatively rapid as it has been, might be taken to be an image of the much longer process of secularization since the Middle Ages. In the spring of 1912, after the *Titanic* disaster, a number of American women contributed money toward a monument to be installed in Washington, D.C., a monument specifically devoted "to the everlasting memory of male chivalry"—that is, the action of many gentlemen aboard the *Titanic* in insisting that the women and children occupy the lifeboats, leaving themselves to drown. "To the . . . *memory* of male chivalry": There, even if unintentionally, is the appropriately elegiac note.

Today it would be impossible to imagine a plane-crash evacuation with the men standing aside, calmly, nobly inhaling flames and gases for several minutes and feeling their fingers, ears, and noses burning off, while encouraging the women and children to leave down the slides. Like much else that is traditional, chivalry has proved unsuited to the world we have chosen to create.
