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### Strained Differentiation: Negotiating Grief with Maternal Foundations in Laird Hunt's Neverhome

Heidie L. Raine  
*Cedarville University, Cedarville*, [hraine@cedarville.edu](mailto:hraine@cedarville.edu)

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### Abstract

The intertwining of mother-daughter psyches throughout the early developmental process bonds maternal and filial parties up unto differentiation, at which point the child comes to understand her status as an individual and her mother's status as a separate entity. However, when trauma is introduced midway through the differentiation process, this psychological phenomenon may be hindered, stunting the advanced personal development of the daughter. Abandoned by loss, she may subconsciously fall victim to repressive defenses, insufficient socialization, and destructive behaviors.

In his 2016 novel *Neverhome*, Laird Hunt explores these psychological factors through a traumatized and unreliable female protagonist situated in the historical context of the early Civil War. A theoretically critical reading of Hunt's text exposes the possible psychological tendencies of one such woman through a fictionalized narrative. Authoring plentiful examples of trauma responses, Hunt constructs his protagonist to serve as an archetype of the undifferentiated, unsocialized, and repressively-hindered daughter, and he then places her in a variety of high-stress environments within the plot to highlight her trauma-derived responses.

### Keywords

Psychoanalytic, feminist, differentiation, neverhome, civil war, mothers, daughters, development, trauma

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# Strained Differentiation: Negotiating Grief with Maternal Foundations in Laird Hunt's *Neverhome*

Heidie Raine

*English, Literature, and Modern Languages*

## Introduction

Laird Hunt's *Neverhome* tells the story of Constance Thompson, a young woman who leaves her husband, Bartholomew, and their lives as Indiana farmers to become a Civil War Union soldier under the male pseudonym, Ash. Once leaving her farm, Ash negotiates combat and camp-life in disguise, proving herself capable as a soldier. Early in the novel, she establishes an open line of communication with her deceased mother, who committed suicide a few years prior; Ash seeks her out in many moments of conflict and uncertainty. When Ash eventually ventures home from the war front, she discovers a group of men overrunning her farm. She shoots them, and in the process, accidentally kills her husband as well. Returning to her given name, Constance concludes the story in a state of distress. She resigns to solitude, visited only by the ghosts of her husband and mother. Though physically back in Indiana, Constance fails to feel as though she has truly arrived home because her war-related memories and familial traumas continually torment her. In his novel, Hunt explores how maternal identification can hinder the intertwinement of mother-daughter psyches. He highlights the struggle for such maternally identifying daughters to cope with the loss of a mother, her grief intensified by an unconscious desire for continued maternal intimacy as expressed in her dreams. Further, Hunt showcases how Ash's repressive defenses—specifically, her skewed perceptions of reality in fantasized communication—work to avoid this unconscious longing, and thus, exposes the psychological debilitation Ash experiences as she negotiates differentiation alongside grief.

## Introductory Considerations

### The Fallibility of Critical Theory

Before analyzing a text from a theoretical perspective, readers must first consider the validity and trustworthiness of any theoretical framework. For the Christian, presuppositional inconsistencies between critical theory and Biblical truth appear quickly and vibrantly. Psychoanalytic theory, developed by Australian neurologist and admitted

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atheist Sigmund Freud, begins with a foundational rejection of Scripture. The theory seeks to usurp a Biblical theology of the mind with faulty explanations, asserting that human behaviors are driven primarily by instinct and unconscious drives. Such a position opposes Scripture, which communicates that humans are not victims of their unconscious, but rather rebels who consciously choose sin (*English Standard Version*, Eph. 2.1-3). Where psychoanalysis argues that humans are bound to their instincts, Scripture teaches that through Christ, the believer can be freed from the bonds of sin (John 8.31-32). Additionally, feminist theory proves incompatible with Scripture based on its insistence on divisions in the Body. Feminist theory views all experiences through the lens of patriarchal oppression, thus attacking the believer's responsibility to exist with brothers and sisters in perfect unity (Gal. 3.28).

Given these incongruencies with Scripture, the Christian must reject critical theory as a foundation for truth. However, once astutely aware of its problematic tenets, the Christian is free to use theory as an analytic tool without being swayed by its unbiblical presuppositions. Situating critical theory in this proper light—as a fallible device to understand marginalized perspectives—allows believers to interact with a prominent analytical tool, which preserves their influence and relevance in secular scholarship while also ensuring that Scripture will remain their foundational source of truth.

We therefore accept, reject, and redeem the appropriate outpourings of secular academia, maintaining our scholarly relevance while never compromising on the infallible truth of Scripture. We are in the world, yet never of it.

## **Interdependence of Psychoanalytic and Feminist Theories**

In order to accurately understand the significance of psychological maternal influence in Hunt's novel, one must recognize the interdependent relationship between psychoanalytic and feminist theories. The traditional mother-daughter connection, initiated at conception, creates a unique bond that carries through childhood and into advanced personal development. This bond and its bearing on female psychological development causes "feminist theory and the psychology of gender [to] spill...over" as mothers set the frameworks for their daughters' presuppositions, values, and psychological states (Chodorow 9). Thus, when psychoanalysts look to understand female development, it becomes nearly impossible to separate "this relation to the mother" from the psychologically constructed self since the development of the psyche relies heavily upon maternal socialization (4,14). This socialization informs the tripartite psyche, shaping the daughter's biological desires, mediation of reality, and moral leanings to mirror characteristics of the mother (Dobie 57). Consequently, analysis of a woman's psychotic state must consider the mother because the daughter's acting psyche has been constructed under the guidance and leverage of the continued maternal bond.

## Maternal Identification

### Psychological Unity Between Mother and Daughter

Entwined mother-daughter psyches often restrict daughters from psychological independence, and thus, result in maternal identification. Model filial development involves an initial “phase...characterized by oneness between the child and the mother” (Dobie 118). Differentiation—the process of obtaining an individualized sense of identity independent of the mother—typically separates the twos’ psyches gradually through childhood (118). However, since “women tend to identify more strongly with their girl children,” this ongoing connectivity can obstruct differentiation, leaving the “continuity of identity with the mother” to linger into adult life as the mother overwhelmingly “communicates an identity to the [daughter]” (Flax, *The Conflict* 174; Flax, *Mother-Daughter Relationships* 3; Hunter 473). Such juncture results in maternal identification where daughters “do not experience such a distinct disidentification,” which “hinders the development of a sense of separation” (Nagl-Docekal 113). This enduring identification is personal, specific to the “mother’s general traits of character and values” (Chodorow 52). As such, the mother structures the daughter’s decisions, morals, and feelings rather than the daughter herself, perpetuating a continuity between the two that pervades the psyche and relegates mothers and daughters to a state of psychological oneness (Wright 81). The daughter’s failure to construct an independent sense of self leaves her to rely upon her mother’s precedent.

### Ash and Her Mother in *Neverhome*

Hunt displays this hindering maternal identification in his novel through Ash’s unwavering ties to her deceased mother’s values. In a memory from her childhood, Ash recalls her interactions with an older boy who used to hassle her whenever she went to town. One day specifically, he pushed her into a puddle, and upon returning home with “the front of [her] clothes dark brown,” her mother “grabbed [her] good by the ear and whispered into it hard: ‘We do not ever turn our cheek’” (Hunt 47). This harsh instruction from her mother to always remember grievances and seek vengeance follows Ash later in life. She recalls her mother’s advice throughout the novel, such as when she smashes her mother’s teapot as revenge for turning her over to the insane asylum (170), sternly opposes the jeering mob at her neighbor’s porch (227), seeks to kill the sheriff who had spearheaded the mob (224-225), and violently shoots the men overrunning her farm (232-234). Though daughters typically heed advice from their mothers as a result of maternal socialization, Ash’s stark adherence to this instruction points to a deeper, more pervasive tie to her mother; her loyalty is synonymous with identification because she clings to her mother’s orders even when they breed destruction or violence. This unwavering obedience reveals that Ash would rather prioritize her continued maternal connection than independently evaluate the advice’s value. As such, Ash’s determination to “not ever turn [her] cheek” throughout the remainder of the novel points back to the initial subject of her mother’s command: “we” (47). Ash holds grudges and seeks vengeance in reverence of her mother rather than by independent conviction, and hence, perpetuates her identification with her mother in value

and consequential conduct. Hunt thus displays the extent of maternal identification through the thread of unevaluated advice that Ash subscribes to, exemplifying the lack of distinction between maternal and filial values in their undifferentiated relationship.

## Grief Response to Maternal Loss

### Unconscious Desires for Connectivity in Dreams

For a daughter caught in maternal identification, the death of a mother often incites an unsatisfiable, unconscious desire for continued maternal intimacy that may pervade even the daughter's dreams. Critical theorist Lois Tyson notes that "death is the ultimate abandonment," and that grief responses will differ depending on an individual's "psychological makeup," thus tying the psychological socialization of individuals to their grief intensity and coping skills (22). As such, daughters socialized to depend upon and mutually identify with their mothers often struggle more intensely with maternal death because after a lifetime of maternal connectedness and guidance, sudden autonomy is a "discovery... accompanied by panic, for the [daughter] is still dependent on the mother" (Flax, *Mother-Daughter Relationships* 10, 8). This longing for continued connectivity can seep into the daughter's unconscious, which "is the storehouse of...painful experiences and emotions...[that] we do not want to know about because we feel we will be overwhelmed by them" (Tyson 12). For maternally identifying and grieving women, the "haunting, idealized mother of infancy," perceived through a sort of "fantasy union" where the two are interconnected and interdependent, overtakes a large part of the unconscious (33-34). As the grieving daughter is burdened by an unsatisfiable longing for her deceased mother's psyche to remain attached to and invested in her own, her unconscious longing may grow more pervasive, working its way into her dreams (Flax, *The Conflict* 180; Tyson 18). Though the conscious mind may subdue the daughter's pain while she is awake, such defenses cease during sleep, thus allowing the unconscious "to express itself...dreams," with recurring dreams as "the most reliable indicators of [her] unconscious concerns" (Tyson 18, 21). Psychotherapist and critical theorist Jane Flax addresses this type of filial grief through "the [typical] female psychodynamics the dream encapsulates," which stress a disjointedness "between mother and daughter" (*Mother-Daughter Relationships* 11). Essentially, these dreams showcase the grieving and codependent daughter's unconscious and unprocessed bereavement, making known during sleep the pain that would otherwise remain hidden in the unconscious.

### Ash's Troubling Dreams

Hunt's novel depicts the struggle for such grieving, maternally attached daughters to cope. It highlights Ash's unconscious desire for maternal intimacy specifically through her troubling dreams. More unnerving than a natural death, Ash's mother's suicide ushered unprecedented trauma and premeditated abandonment into Ash's life, heightening her feelings of grief and desertion. The effects of the suicide resultingly pervade Ash's psyche

and present themselves in a repeated dream (Hunt 58-59). In the dream, Ash is stuck in the middle of a crowd of strangers. She is young and unable to find or push her way through them to get to her mother (58-59). Ash's recurring dream points to a central conflict: being unable to reach her mother. When understood within the context of her mother's suicide and the decided severance it incited, this dream becomes another depiction of Ash's unconscious longing for her mother. Having been abandoned by her mother's suicide, Ash faces consistently overwhelming waves of grief, desertion, and trauma that she relegates to the unconscious. She speaks of the tears of her mother "[finding] a way out of the dream and on [her] face", and she mentions chewing tobacco, "thinking it might help wake [her] up from [her] reveries" (153, 203). In these instances, the breakdowns of Ash's painful longings flood her sleep with agonizing dreams and "rich visions" that remind her of her mother's suicide and their resulting separation (111). Ash attempts to avoid this pain and terror, yet the sting of abandonment and the knowledge of her mother's intentional choice of suicide intensifies her repression. This convolution of Ash's psyche prompts her ignored trauma to emerge into her dreams (111). Consequently, Ash details increasingly more dreams throughout the text, plagued by nightmares of abandonment, her mother, and death (42,76,110). She longs for her lost maternal intimacy so intensely that her psyche resorts to dreams to express the unconscious desire, and thus, exposes her ongoing battle to cope with her mother's suicide. Hunt thus employs each of these dreams as a nod to the pervasive nature of such grief and unconscious desire for the maternally identifying daughter.]

## Faltering Sense of Reality

Daughters who repress their unconscious desire for maternal intimacy amidst grief may find their perceptions of reality faltering. Fantasized communication with the dead mother, a psychological defense, can emerge as one manifestation of this detachedness. Often already troubled by unconscious struggle, the grieving and maternally identifying daughter may develop emotional and repressive tendencies to further avoid her unsatisfiable longing for closeness with the mother (Wright 104). Of these repressive tendencies, a skewed sense of reality blurs fantasy with the real world to mask the daughter's conflict and pain by confusing existent and imagined struggles (Tyson 34). Essentially, the daughter's psyche makes it so that she "may not be unable to tell the difference between what is happening and what she thinks is happening" as a means of eluding grief (Dobie 56). If unable to determine reality, then the daughter is never forced to validate or acknowledge her bereavement since it could potentially be illusory. Within this already weakened sense of reality, the daughter's desire to remain connected to the mother may emerge in imagined conversations and efforts to restore psychological closeness with her (Flax, *The Conflict* 176). The mother is the maternally identifying daughter's only "ongoing contact and relationship [to] help fulfill her psychological and social needs," and becomes, even after death, the key figure to preserve union with (Chodorow 62). As such, these daughters will frequently strive to communicate and "check back with the mother for reassurance" as "emotional refueling" to maintain maternal approval and connectivity (Flax, *The Conflict* 176). Thus, as maternally identifying daughters bear the burden of grief, they may also negotiate this unconscious, repressive loss of reality. It masks pain through

imagined, communicative continuity with the dead mother, such that the torment of loss is “expunge[d] from consciousness” by the fantastic appearance of an ongoing dialogue (Tyson 12). The daughter’s reliance upon her mother, left desolate by death, leaves her to reach for any semblance of maternal guidance in an illusory union.

## **Ash’s Fantasized Communication**

*Neverhome* portrays Ash’s faltering sense of reality through her imagined yet ongoing communication with her deceased mother, which reveals the filial fight to cope with maternal loss. In Ash’s struggle to accept her mother’s suicide, her repressed unconscious develops a fantasized line of communication with her mother, treating her mother as though she were cognitively functional to maintain the codependency that existed between them before death. Likewise, the suddenness of Ash’s mother’s suicide further complicated Ash’s ability to cleave since she had not anticipated their abrupt severance. In the days before her initial departure to war, Ash reconciles her uncertainties about combat when she “[speaks]...down through the dirt” to “ask...her [mother] what she thought” about her plan of disguise (8). Only after receiving her mother’s support, when her mother tells her, “Go on. Go on and see what you get,” does Ash solidify her plans to leave (8). As such, Hunt showcases Ash’s faltering sense of reality in that she waits for confirmation and support from her imagined mother before committing to her decision. Likewise, the day before leaving for war, Ash continually repeats that she is “leaving...tomorrow and maybe forever” to inform her repressively constructed image of her mother (80). Though Ash exhibits certainty about her plan to leave for war when speaking to Bartholomew, she waits to depart until confirming the plan with her imagined mother, thus emphasizing her severe disjuncture from reality. Despite its illusory state, Ash finds reassurance in this conversation, prompting her to leave the next morning with a commitment to fight (80). Further, when fighting homesickness and uncertainty, Ash sternly tells her deceased mother that she will press on in battles, finding solace and strength through speaking to an imagined figure (15-16). Ash also notes, upon injuring her arm in battle, that she could only talk to and rely on her mother (108). By speaking to her dead mother as though she were alive and drawing strength from a fantasized dialogue, Ash displays psychological instability because she repressively constructs an imagined mother to seek assurance from rather than accepting that her mother had severed their connection. She repressively grapples to maintain closeness with her mother by substituting their once direct communication with an imagined replacement. Thus, Hunt’s novel displays instances of psychological instability which emphasize the repressive effects of loss felt by daughters caught in maternal dependency.

## **The Struggle of Differentiation Following Maternal Loss**

The specific task of differentiation for grieving and maternally identifying daughters incites significant psychological strain. The emotional burden of such loss may push daughters to



avoidance or denial, and thus, lead them to resist the differentiating process (Tyson 15). In these acts of avoidance, daughters will attempt to carry on with the same maternal connectivity they experienced throughout their mothers' lives, or flee their grief entirely (Flax, *The Conflict* 176).

Differentiation requires maternally identifying daughters to face "the fear of being abandoned by the mother, or the rage at having been abandoned emotionally by her," inciting the psychologically strenuous process of differentiation that forces daughters to negotiate the balance of newfound independence and lost maternal codependency (Flax, *Mother-Daughter Relationships* 12). Since "daughters serve as confidants [and] friends" to their mothers, the degree of closeness in maternal identification "often retards a daughter's ability...to separate" (12). This habitual intimacy inhibits natural endings, such as death, from "break[ing] the underlying psychological unity" between mother and daughter, and consequently wages debilitating conflict on the daughter's psyche (Chodorow 59). She must suddenly "develop a sufficiently individuated and strong sense of self" by "consciously or unconsciously rejecting [the] mother," despite having spent her life in unity with and reverence of her mother (65, 34). These grieving daughters, as a result, face "what feels like an irresolvable dilemma: to be loved and nurtured, and remain tied to the mother, or to be autonomous and externally successful" in psychological independence (Flax, *Mother-Daughter Relationships* 12). While the death of a mother logically points a grieving daughter to differentiation, the codependent daughter's maternal socialization complicates the process by leaving her in a double bind of seeming betrayal: "if she attempts to regain a sense of fusion, she will not be able to be autonomous. If she exerts autonomy, she must reject the infantile mother and give up her needs for fusion" (Flax, *The Conflict* 178). Thus, the psychological separation that maternally identifying daughters face upon such loss, in addition to grief, taxes the psyche considerably.

## **Ash's Struggle to Differentiation After Her Mother's Suicide**

Hunt's novel showcases the psychological struggle for maternally identifying and grieving daughters to differentiate through Ash's attempts to cling to elements of her mother. While both alive, Ash and her mother developed a closeness that made Ash's eventual task of separation overwhelmingly difficult. Ash and her mother lived alone on their farm, taking care of each other and existing as each other's confidants and friends (Hunt 184). Memories of Ash crying as a "scrawny child in her mother's arms" and her mother kicking Ash's supposed father off the farm speak to the interwoven connection and exclusive dependence between the two; aside from sporadic trips to town or the neighbor woman's house, the two solely interacted with and relied upon each other, creating both a physical and psychological codependency (202, 189). As such, when Ash's mother commits suicide, Ash wrestles with the notion of separation and resists differentiation by clinging to elements of her mother's identity. She likewise struggles to accept that, unlike natural death, her mother's suicide was a decided abandonment of their relationship. As a result, Ash clings more firmly to her mother. Originally Constance, Ash chooses the name 'Ash' for her

combat disguise, which references her mother, who committed suicide when she “climbed up into the ash tree with a rope” (50, 229). When prompted to adopt a new title and identity for disguise, she chooses one that allows her to identify with her mother, which displays the strained intensity of her differential struggles; where Ash’s mother abandoned her daughter, Ash clings tightly to her mother. Similarly, despite having access to military-grade weapons, Ash asks her husband to bring her mother’s gun when she decides to shoot the men on her farm (230). Even further, after killing all of the men, Ash goes to retrieve the deed to her farm which was hidden in the ash tree in “the notch just above where [her mother] had tied her rope” (238). In each of these instances, Hunt displays Ash’s dilemma of differentiation by having her cling to nodes of her mother while also juggling her avoidance of grief. Though initially Ash allowed herself to feel the pain of loss at home, and thus acknowledged her separateness from her mother, eventually “those smells and sights and sounds” which reminded her of her mother “chewed and worked at [her] like worms in their corridors” until Ash “packed up [her] bag and went to war” to flee her grief (139). Yet even while fleeing, Ash maintains points of connectivity; in selecting a name that reflects her mother’s suicide, wanting her mother’s weapon to kill her enemies, and hiding the farm deed exactly where her mother died, Ash preserves a juncture with her mother that highlights her inability to cleave. As such, Hunt illustrates the psychological burden of differentiation for the maternally identifying daughter by emphasizing these strained efforts to maintain maternal connectivity, which preserves relational unity at the expense of filial independence.

## Conclusion

Through his detailing of mother-daughter relationships, maternal identification, repressed grief, and the psychological burden of differentiation, Laird Hunt explores the adverse effects of entwined mother-daughter psyches in his novel *Neverhome*. The text exposes how such relational dependency complicates maternal loss for these reliant daughters, and it highlights their struggle to separate after lifetimes of psychological unity with the mother. Hunt’s attentiveness to the undifferentiated daughter, who wrestles with questions of identity and independence, holds relevance even today for the millions of young girls acquainted with the loss of a mother through death, divorce, adoption, and/or foster care. Though likely less severe than Hunt’s extreme and fictionalized example, these girls often experience a similar struggle in their maternal disjunction, having been detached from the biological mother-and-daughter bond. As such, Hunt’s narrative may act as a tool, providing insights on these unique relational struggles and allowing audiences to better understand the challenges these girls face as they develop a sense of self apart from their first and most defining relationship.

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