

# AUM, SHE WHO IS MOST AUSPICIOUS

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## ABSTRACT

Light seekers. Familial secrets. And parentified children.

*Aum, She Who is Most Auspicious* is a coming-of-age screenplay about what it means to care for others – and for our selves. On the morning she expects to leave for Europe to pursue music studies, 17-year-old Elise Lichten wakes to find her plane ticket gone – and her mother, too. It's not the first time. As daughter to guru-seeking Paula, Elise and her sister Lily are used to their mother's spiritual malaise and unannounced retreats at ashrams overseas. Elise is beyond ready to be free of her family. She has to find a place for her little sister to stay till their mother returns.

At first, 17-year-old Gavin Cahill's adoration for Elise comes with a family – a *stable* family – for Elise to entrust her sister. But when she begins to warm to his affections, she opens to a world she's adamantly rejected: one of spiritual devotion, non-duality and an assuredness in the divine. Soon, she loses sight of her dream to study music and finds a new dream in Gavin.

But their love comes at a cost: their relationship reveals long-hidden family secrets. When Paula returns, distant and vulnerable, Elise has to decide what she cares for most—and what she's willing to lose in order to stand unapologetically in who she is.

Combining research in storytelling, feminine psychology, and archetypes and mythology, AUM is a heroine's journey about a young girl's descent to the underworld and auspicious return.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **THE ORIGINS**

There are many different ways to tell the same story. Often, the stories we tell are those that speak strongest at the core of our being. In its early percolations, AUM, SHE WHO IS MOST AUSPICIOUS took place in a different setting, with a different atmosphere and backdrop. The evolution of the story was not primarily in changing plot points and character arcs (though, of course, those occurred too), but in the story's soul – the underlying longings and truths of both characters and writer.

As a writer and artist, I find my heart in telling family stories, particularly stories with young protagonists. My first intention is to honour childhood and young adulthood by creating characters that have insight, wisdom and knowledge. What the child knows is not “lesser” than what the adult knows, but there are differences. As adults, we often overlook both the child before us, and the childhood instinct within. I want to encapsulate the lives of children and young people by portraying the vast range of their emotional experiences, longings and loneliness. It is also important for me to place these characters alongside adult characters dealing (or adamantly not dealing) with their own problems in order to demonstrate the child's attunement with their parents' emotional worlds. I want to show what can be known and understood without being spoken.

In early inspirations for my thesis screenplay, I wanted to tell a story about a young girl, maybe eleven years old or so, who was left alone, and would have to fend for herself. What evolved was a story with a protagonist not quite so isolated. I found that, within the theme of abandonment, there are universal truths that can be told from the realm of our most primal – yet insular – world: the family. Within that realm, there is much at stake. What happens when the roles played are not typical, when the child becomes parent, and the parent, the child; furthermore, what happens when it is not safe to be who we are within the family – when love is conditional? There can be abandonment both with and without departure.

As I approached the process of writing AUM, two central goals became clear: the first was that I wanted to tell a story with a young adult protagonist who was handed adult responsibilities; the second was that I wanted to write a Heroine's Journey. While conceptually parallel to Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, the Heroine's Journey specifically involves an *inward* departure.

The Support Document serves as a companion piece to my MFA Thesis Screenplay. I aim to illuminate the screenwriting structure as it pertains to my script, as well as shine light on my writing process. This document will discuss the following:

### **Process and Plot**

- Screenplay Structure and the Writing of AUM
- Story Synopsis
- AUM and The Heroine's Journey

- Themes

### **Research and Discussion**

- The Family Drama: Secrets, Foils and Parentified Children
- Characters and Archetypes
- Meeting the Animus: The Brother/Sister Trap
- Background: The Family Drama
- Corollary Films

### **The Future of AUM**

- Present Story Issues and Future Rewrites

I encourage readers to approach the story and its discussion with wonder and discernment. It is my hope to reach both the heart and the head, and for the argument taking place within the viewer/reader to be accessible.

## **PROCESS AND PLOT**

### **WRITING THE SCREENPLAY AND MY PROCESS**

Stories are a selection of events and experiences thematically linked by cause-and-effect, and woven together. They can act as a synecdoche for the human experience, illuminating our often hidden sameness. I strive for an overall unity of themes. I want every element to work together to create the story's living essence. By looking at spiritual longing in every one of my characters, I began to more deeply understand each character's truths and, as a result, the greater truths of the story. As these truths appeared, the plot's instincts demanded following.

When it first percolated four years ago, AUM took place in a different setting. Initially, it was more explicit that Paula, the mother character, is mentally ill. The more obvious presence of her condition presented the world of emergency rooms and psychiatric wards. Interestingly, this setting was a "darling" I needed to let go of. As soon as I understood that I could let this setting go while still holding the plot and characters, the story seemed much more reachable. I opened my eyes to the world around me, and saw that I could convey the themes of mental instability, apathy and loneliness under the theme of spiritual seeking.



The process of writing AUM was distinct for me, in that I worked with the story in many different forms before coming to the feature length screenplay it is now. First it was a feature with an 11-year-old protagonist, an only child, and then it was a TV pilot with two sisters. After that, to play more with the story, I began writing in prose. It was in this prose writing that the theme of spiritual seeking really began to take form. Through this writing, I better understood Paula's motivations for leaving, and the contrast between her daughters who witnessed it. Here are two passages of the prose writing I did to get a feel for the story and its world:

When Lily turned four, and I was ten and a half, Mom told me we weren't going to celebrate that day, that we'd only celebrate in our heads. She told me that I wasn't allowed to say happy birthday, or to give her a present, because she didn't want her to know that it was her birthday. When I asked why, she said it made no difference, and she wasn't getting a paycheck this month because of the nighttime and well...

Well, what? I asked.

Well, it doesn't make a difference to Lily.

When Lily woke up on April 3<sup>rd</sup> she looked disappointed. Mom caught on, too, but carried on as normal just as she said she would. A month later, Mom told me we could finally celebrate her birthday. She'd make her a pancake-cake and give her sweetened yogurt, dessert for breakfast, and won't that be nice for Lily? We'll take the ferry to Vancouver Island and make a day of it. May 16<sup>th</sup> is better for a birthday, anyway, because there's still so much rain in April and it can get a bit cold and didn't we want to walk through Beacon Hill Park? And visit the goats? And not wear our slickers and our boots?

Lily doesn't care about goats, I said. But the truth was that she did. She liked all those kid things like feeding baby animals and going to playgrounds we don't go to every day, but I was mad and didn't know how else to say it.

We went to see the goats later, and Lily ran up and down the trails of the park and danced in freeze frames in storyboards of some animated cartoon. We bought milkshakes and drank them on the beach off Dallas Road and Lily asked, how far to the city across the water?

It's Washington, I said.

Could I swim there?

You could try, I said. But you probably wouldn't make it.

Sure you could, said Mom. But don't try till you've trained some.

I don't really want to try, said Lily. I just want to be able to.

The next year, when Lily turned five, Mom didn't celebrate again, even though I knew we had the money. It had been a good month. I didn't ask her about it and I didn't say Happy Birthday to Lily. But when May 16<sup>th</sup> came around, Mom woke her up with pancake cake again. I watched Lily lick syrup off her lips and cuddle Mom like she had no idea.

Her fingers were sticky in her pink flannel sheets. I don't know when we finally got around to washing them, but the fruit flies came first.

\* \* \* \*

I didn't know if she'd keep meditating once she knew Mom was gone. The last time Mom left, Lily had hardly thrown a fit. Mom had said goodbye. She'd kissed her head first thing in the morning and told her she smelled of buttercups and chamomile.

Why are you going?

I have to find my centre, said Mom.

I know where it is, said Lily, and she took Mom's hand and pressed it to her own breastbone. I'm keeping it safe. I can give it back.

Mom left without saying much else and I could tell Lily was sad about it. I didn't ask where she was going and neither did Lily. She'd said goodbye and that was good enough.

She'd cried a bit. She wasn't heaving sobs or anything like that, but about a week after she left, the crying started. I could hear it from the kitchen and couldn't stand it. I asked her if there was anything we could do that would make it better and she said she didn't know what buttercups really smelled like.

So we set off to find some. We looked through gardens across the island at everyone's houses, the houses that always looked like they'd fall or sink or something, their gardens always immaculate with lined-up tulips in rainbows. I finally remembered that I didn't know either, that we could have just looked it up, so I told her we'd go to the library and find their pictures and then, she'd see, we'd find a buttercup and it would smell just like her head. I was sure of it. She was getting

tired riding the tandem though, so I let her hop off and parked the bike and locked it and up to a skinny tree and said I could piggyback her for a while, I didn't mind. But then she fell asleep and I carried her all the way home on my back even though she was a clunky eight-year-old and round as a globe, and all I could think was why, why hadn't I thought of the library sooner.

Writing prose was really helpful for me because much of the story is driven by inner conflict. Playing with Elise's voice in the first person enabled me to understand her relationships, experiences, and how these had affected her. I could also better understand the dynamic between Lily, Paula and Elise.

Understanding the inner voice of a protagonist is integral when writing. We look to stories for catharsis and learning, and, probably most importantly, to know we're not alone. Our earliest stories were myths, meant to teach, inspire and comfort us. Myths allow us to explore the infinite layers of the human experience through story. As writers, understanding our characters' motivations and desires enables us to be authentic in our work. As such, we may reach our audiences more deeply.

Although all stories have the standard beginning, middle and ending, screenplays specifically have a more definitive structure than prose. There are key plot points to hit by certain pages, and key directions these points should entail. Considering plot points is a great way to help a plot take form. When structuring AUM, I used Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat*, Michael Haug's *Story Mastery*, and Amnon Buchbinder's *The Way of the Screenwriter* for reference. I also referred greatly to Joseph Campbell's

*The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and Maureen Murdoch's *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest to Wholeness*.

Following is a short synopsis of AUM, SHE WHO IS MOST AUSPICIOUS, followed by a breakdown of the script in plot points. I will then address the story structure in terms of the Hero/Heroine's Journey.

### **AUM: STORY SYNOPSIS**

Elise Lichten is no stranger to making sacrifices for her family. Between mediating her mother's faltering moods and spiritual malaise and having to compensate for her by attending to her sister's needs, she's had little chance to give herself some real airtime. With no father or family support, it's up to her to keep things together. But now is her chance. At seventeen, she's graduated and has been accepted to the Vienna School of Music where she can devote herself to the viola. She has it all planned out: backpacking through Western Europe, and finishing in Austria.

That is, till her mother takes off the day she's supposed to leave. Uncomfortable with Elise's departure, Paula beats her to it. She leaves her only a note: she has gone to an ashram to be still for a little while, and will return when things settle.

Elise is livid; this was not part of the plan. Now, with Lily to care for, there's no way Elise can go. If Paula doesn't come back soon, she'll lose her spot in the music program. Distraught, she approaches Julian, her viola teacher and mentor. He

suggests she find a place where Lily can stay – and feel safe – just till her mother returns. After all, she'll have to come back eventually. This isn't the first time this has happened.

But Elise is someone who keeps to herself, mostly. Gavin Cahill has been flirting with her ever since he heard her play at Kirtan night, and she's been quick to brush him off. But when she spots Lily playing with his little brother and sister at the park, an idea takes form: if she plays music with Gavin, Lily will have to spend time with the Cahill family. And they all seem like such nice people.

And Gavin isn't so bad – even if he is more interested in chanting bhajans than *real* music. The thing is, the more entranced Gavin becomes with the combination of their sounds, the more entranced Elise becomes well. Meanwhile, Lily makes friends with the Cahills, becoming one of the kids – like family. Charlotte Cahill takes a real curiosity to her, even if her husband Marcus seems uncharacteristically suspicious.

Soon, going away doesn't mean as much to Elise. Maybe leaving was more about escape from her mother than seeing the world and finding herself. Maybe *this* is finding herself. Why should she need external reinforcement? Her whole life – and Lily and Gavin – are here. As she understands how complicated it would be to leave, Elise resolves to stay.

To celebrate, Elise and Gavin take a trip to Pender Island, where Gavin's family owns a cabin. As they clean up the space for the summer rentals, Elise recognizes evidence of her mother: a Mandela she's drawn, and, most definitively, the name of the island: Theodore Hills. "T.H." are the initials her mother used when referring to her father, who she has never met. As she puts this together, she remembers Marcus's resistance to her.

Without a word to Gavin, she returns home. Feeling neglected by her sister, Lily is beside herself, and runs away. Elise turns to the family to help find her, and breaks up with Gavin, without telling him the truth. Charlotte, seeing her son's heartbreak, and her husband's discomfort with Elise, begins to put the pieces together.

Elise receives a phone call from an ashram in India: it's her mother, and she needs a way back to Canada. Elise surrenders, and transfers her ticket from B.C. to Europe to a ticket from India to B.C. Her sister needs her mother, after all. When Paula returns, Elise once again feels the pull of her mother and sister's need; she feels trapped once again, only now there's no way out. No Vienna, and no Gavin.

When Gavin sends her a tape of his music, a piece the two had been working on together, Elise picks up her viola and plays – she *really* plays. In doing so, she integrates the animus power she found with Gavin with the spiritual teachings of the mother she had rejected for so long. Soon, it is not about running away from her

family or escaping reality, but about her own path and her own truth: she wants to devote herself to her music.

Re-inspired, she does everything in her power to get a ticket to Vienna, and to ensure Lily's security: she sells her viola, a new one given to her by Julian; she confronts Marcus, her father, and requests financial help; she speaks with Charlotte, who has since learnt about her husband's parallel life. With the truth out in the open, there's a new family for both Lily and Elise, and the financial contribution Elise needs to achieve her dream. Charlotte assures Elise that there is a village there, for both her and her sister.

With security on the island, Elise departs without it being an escape.

In terms of screenwriting plot points, AUM can be broken down as follows:

- Exposition: Elise Lichten is a budding violist, graduating, and ready to travel and pursue a career in music.
- Inciting Incident: Paula abandons her family – leaving Elise to care for Lily. Elise can't go to Vienna.
- First Act Turning Point: Elise accepts Gavin's invitation to play music, thereby bringing Lily into the Cahill family.
- Midpoint: Elise falls in love with Gavin and loses sight of her dream.
- Second Act Turning Point: Elise discovers that Marcus is her father, making Gavin her brother. Elise breaks up with Gavin. Paula returns.

- Climax: Gavin sends Elise a tape – reigniting the spirit of her music. Elise resolves to find a way to Vienna.
- Denouement: With the Cahill's help, Elise leaves for Vienna. Charlotte assures Elise that Lily is not alone.

While the story can be broken down as described above, a great source of inspiration for AUM was the Hero's Journey, as described by Joseph Campbell, and the Heroine's Journey, as described by Maureen Murdoch. The story can also be broken down by way of the Hero's Journey steps these writers describe.

### **THE HEROINE'S JOURNEY**

In Campbell's Monomyth, the Hero's Journey is broken down into twelve steps: the ordinary world; the call to adventure; the refusal of the call; meeting the mentor; crossing the threshold; tests, allies and enemies; approach; the ordeal; the reward; the road back; the resurrection; and the return with the elixir. While Campbell did not disregard the Heroine's Journey, it has been discussed in great detail in feminine psychology in the last few decades. In *Descent to the Goddess*, psychologist Sylvia Brinton Perera looks at the journey to the inner feminine through way of the Sumerian myth of Inanna, goddess of love, wisdom, war, fertility and lust. Inanna descends to the underworld and meets her dark sister or twin, Ereshkigal. The myth sees the heroine unite the dark parts of the feminine with the light (Perera 9-11).



Author and Jungian Psychotherapist Maureen Murdoch adapted the hero's journey stages in her book, *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*. Murdoch had the experience of meeting Joseph Campbell, and showed him the breakdown of her adaptation. "Women don't need to make the journey," Campbell reportedly responded. "They are the place that everyone is trying to get to" (Davis 5). In a society dominated by patriarchy and a disillusioned masculine, perhaps journeys to the feminine are the stories that need to be told and experienced by both women and men alike.

When writing AUM, I sought to incorporate both the hero and heroine's journey structures, as I believe they have fundamental similarities. However, I did tend to focus more on Heroine's Journey distinctions when looking at Elise's journey. As such, here I will identify the components in AUM as discussed in Murdoch's work (Murdock 5).

1. Separation from the feminine: Elise longs to be free of her family – a feminine force – and sets out to leave.
2. Identification with the masculine: Elise meets Gavin – and their connection ignites a new part of herself.
3. Gathering of allies: Elise befriends the Cahills and falls in love with Gavin.
4. Road of trials: Elise balances caring for Lily and finding a way to achieve her dream.
5. Finding the boon of success: Elise falls for Gavin – she can move from the restrictions of her family to her love for him.

6. Awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity; death: Elise learns that Gavin is her brother.
7. Initiation: descent to the goddess: Elise falls into depression. Paula returns.
8. Urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine: Elise goes to the water, chants.
9. Healing the mother/daughter split: Elise confronts Paula about her departure. Elise tells Paula she is going to leave for Vienna.
10. Healing the wounded masculine: Elise confronts Marcus.
11. Integration of feminine and masculine: Elise listens to the tapes that Gavin sent her, and plays along with them on viola. This reignites her spirit with the viola, and her connection to the divine.

Heroine's Journeys are seen often in cinema and young adult stories: *The Secret Garden* (1993) and *Whale Rider* (2003) are two film adaptations that successfully convey this journey. More recently, *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014) can be identified as a Heroine's Journey with a teen protagonist. I will discuss films and stories that inspired my work further in the Corollary Films section.

## RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

### THE FAMILY DRAMA: SECRETS, FOILS AND PARENTIFIED CHILDREN

In *Meeting the Madwoman*, Linda Schierse Leonard discusses a fragmented mirroring dynamic as seen in *Moonstruck* (1987) in which an “ailing” mother calls her son home, thus forcing him to lose his lover. Such interactions are often the case in co-dependent parent-child relationships. If a mother’s “personality is independent and unhealthy, she needs her daughter to mirror her in order to feel secure and centered” (Leonard 61).

In AUM, I’ve established the dynamic between Paula and Elise to demonstrate a similar toxicity. Elise is accustomed to filling in for her spiritually “ailing” mother – to taking the parental role for both her mother and sister, accounting for their needs while losing sight of her own. In *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Alice Miller describes the consequences of a mother’s inability to fulfill her child’s need, and instead, looks to her child for assurance:

Quite unconsciously, the mother then tries to assuage her own needs through her child. This does not rule out strong affection; the mother often loves her child passionately, but not in the way he needs to be loved. The reliability, continuity, and constancy that are so important for the child are therefore missing from this exploitive relationship (Miller 30).

Elise’s upbringing saw that she neglect her own needs in order to fulfill her

mother's. As witness to her mother's instability, she made it her objective to stabilize her parent. As such, there is a kind of numbness to her; "what is missing above all is the framework within which the child could experience [her] feeling and emotion" (Miller 30). She only knows how her mother's wellbeing has determined hers.

In Lily, I hope to represent the divine child – the child who seeks the nurturance and unconditional love that is instinctive, primal and necessary for emotional flowering. Lily, while seeming to be a character with her own quirks and objectives, in actuality highlights what has been long abandoned in Elise. Lily's pre-pubescent age presents what is at stake for her. Her character represents hope and love. With this hope and love comes fragility and fear. Lily, like Elise, has seen her mother's need. It is perhaps more innocent; Lily mirrors her mother. She meditates and draws Mandalas. She chants with her. She longs for her approval, acceptance and, above all, her presence.

Having been influenced by young adult literature and coming-of-age films, I intuitively decided Lily's age. Corollary stories include *The Secret Garden* (1995), *Whale Rider* (2002) and *Bee Season* (2005). Stories following young female protagonists typically follow a girl between the ages of 9 and 11 in what Freud would call the "latency period"; however, in *Reviving Ophelia*, Dr. Mary Pipher counters Freud's argument by stating that these girls "are anything but latent" (Pipher 18). Girls of this age feel on top of the world – they are unstoppable. The

roots of their confidence come from the combination of the androgyny of pre-pubescence and the independence that comes from being capable of caring for their selves.

But children of this age still *need*. In Lily, I wanted to enforce this power and confidence, and contrast it with the intense vulnerability that comes from having an unstable primary caregiver. In order to remain safe in this relationship, Lily has adapted herself to be exactly what her mother wants. It is a survival mechanism. She is on the cusp of womanhood, and must be nurtured and cared for before entering this space – before her emotional world becomes her own personal responsibility. This inherent need in childhood is fundamental; Lily must first be cared for in order to learn to care for herself. In the story's greater truth, Elise must first see Lily cared for – her own inner child – before she can heal.

## **CHARACTERS AND ARCHETYPES**

Because I'm primarily dealing with young characters, it is important to understand the parents' backgrounds. In AUM, the antecedent action is the motivating force behind the story. As children who provide "mirrors" for their parents' image, Elise, Gavin and Lily are dealing with their parents' cyclical shadows. The choices their parents made determine their circumstances and needs. These characters and their dynamics are archetypal.

To Marcus, Paula represented a “Dark Muse”: “The dark or tragic Muse is the woman who lives out a man’s dark romantic side and is often used by the artist as the model of mad forces” (Leonard 121). While the relationship between Marcus and Paula held love and passion and the flare that comes with what’s forbidden, ultimately, Paula’s instability forced Marcus to retreat. His choice was Charlotte and the family he had already begun. His marriage with Charlotte is genuine and he loves her deeply. Yet, in ending his affair with Paula, he ended his connection with a spiritual existence and his connection to his own darkness, leaving his shadows to continuously tap at his shoulder and show up unconsciously in his actions and emotional wellbeing.

Often, a man who is inspired by this dark Muse has not acknowledged or integrated his own wild side and unknowingly seeks, through contact with this dark, mad feminine energy, to gain access to his own creativity, to the shadowy recesses of his own unconscious (Leonard 120).

As Marcus suppresses his connection to Paula, he suppresses his connection to the Divine, even going so far as to attempt to withhold his family from philosophical thought and experience. Such spiritual and artistic suppression can also be seen in Gavin’s inner world. His spiritual longing both leads him to reject his father and to meeting Elise, thus, repeating the cycle established by their parents.

In holding Marcus on a pedestal, Paula is “prey to false notions of fulfillment,” believing only that acceptance from him will affirm who she is, and her reason to exist. In holding her relationship with Marcus so dominantly in her heart, she is unable to free herself from her own existential barriers and live a full, radiant life.

Elise, Gavin and Lily must recognize and face these wounds in order to break the pattern and forge their own destinies. And yes, they must meet their own shadows, as well.

### **MEETING THE ANIMUS: THE BROTHER/SISTER TRAP**

When people ask me about this story, one of the first points I'm drawn to speak of is the relationship between Gavin and Elise. Perhaps this is because it is the storyline that is most accessible as an archetype. Most of us know and remember the pain of falling in love for the first time, how the rest of the world falls away in our devotion to that love, and the innocence lost in the inevitable demise of a first romantic relationship. The romantic love that blooms between them is a draw to the story because it is doomed, and the loss is familiar.

This storyline evolved quite naturally. Initially, there were two male adolescent characters: one who acted as romantic partner and another who was a half brother Elise had never met. I decided to combine the characters when I saw they were playing the same beat. However, this combination raised a storyline that created many challenges. It took fine attention to ensure it didn't become "sensational" or off-putting. Furthermore, it needed to be justified. I needed to support this element thematically.

In my research, anecdotal incest was not difficult to find. It appears frequently in myths. It represents rebirth – a way in which two come together to become the most powerful form of their selves, be it by means of a child or of the flowering achieved in union (Neuman 198). In the Egyptian myth of Isis, goddess of health, marriage and wisdom, Isis marries her brother, Osiris, god of death, life and resurrection. Isis presents light; Osiris presents dark. Together, they have a son, Horus (Neuman 312-313). In Greek mythology, Zeus and Hera were brother and sister. Oedipus unintentionally marries his mother. In the Norse myth of Sigmund and his sister Signy, the two murder Signy's daughter and husband, and together have a son, Siggeir.

However, it wasn't in these anecdotes that I found the "meat" of the support for my decision. It was as I delved into the Heroine's Journey that I began to understand, fundamentally, what was at stake for Elise, and how her relationship with Gavin represents a greater sacrifice.

To Elise, Gavin was part of her journey to wholeness. I knew right away he was a way of highlighting the masculine qualities that had been rejected in her upbringing. Though Elise was raised by a woman, she is a daughter of patriarchy. Her mother's actions were determined by her relationship with Marcus, Elise's father. Robert Johnson describes living under the domination of the man or god within, the animus. He notes that it is a "great drama in the interior life of a woman when she challenges the animus's supremacy and says, 'I will look at you'" (Murdock 59).



As Elise unites with Gavin, she meets her own animus. But it isn't without cost. Their union equates with a kind of death, a loss of innocence.

Knowing this basic reality permits a woman to give up trying to be agreeable to parental and animus imperatives and ideals. It is like hitting rock bottom, from where they are irrelevant. It revitalizes all principles, and opens a woman to the paradoxes involved in living with the Self (Perera 33-34).

She is made aware of her own power, power not only to create good, but to induce destruction, as well.

Consummation with a mirror image of one's self defines the desire to fully accept and reveal all parts that have been suppressed. Perera describes incest with a mother or sister:

The erotic bond permits the innate connection to positive shadow qualities the woman may never have had conscious access to in herself. It is also a return to the possibility of being intimately reconnected to an other who is like herself and who can, therefore, validate her fully.

This resonated with the brother and sister bond I've written in AUM. Gavin is, in many ways, affirming Elise in who she is by expressing the parts of herself that have been suppressed in her rejection of her mother, such as spirituality and devotion. In his affirmation, Gavin allows her to "go forth with her own feminine soul, free from bondage to the outer collective" (Perera 46).

Like Inanna's descent to the underworld, Elise too confronts the "archetypal, patriarchal shadow" (Perera 53). The knowledge of Gavin's relation to her not only

exhibits the loss of their love, but also highlights that which has been dishonest between mother and daughter. The loss of the relationship between Gavin and Elise presents a sacrifice – a sacrifice that makes way for newness and opportunity; Elise faces this shadow in order to ascend.

***Leaving the Garden of Protection: Finding the Spiritual Parent Within***



In his essay, *I Came Out of the Mother Naked*, poet Robert Bly discusses the Great Mother archetypes as “four-armed mother cross,” as described by Erich Neumann. The cross consists of the Great Mother, the Good Mother, the Death Mother and the Ecstatic Mother. Bly notes Leonardo da Vinci’s solitary life, as he had no relationship with his parents. However, Leonardo was accompanied by the active presence of a

spiritual parent, the Ecstatic Mother. “She visited him always, and he did several paintings of her, showing over her shoulder the wild rocks where she lived”; one of da Vinci’s familiar paintings of the Ecstatic Mother can be seen in *The Virgin and Saint Anne* (Bly 36-41).

In writing AUM, what I came to know was that this longing for the “Ecstatic” mother is not unique to any one character. In actuality, it is this longing for the *Mother* that perpetrates through *every* character: Elise looks for her in her viola and in Gavin,

Gavin in *Elise*, Lily in *Charlotte*, Marcus in *Paula*, and Paula both in *Marcus* and her own children. This insatiable desire is the result of deep-seated wounding, both collectively from the implications of centuries of patriarchy and individually from being mirror to a mother's projections in infancy. And yet, seeking the Mother in an "external" source will never provide the sustenance necessary for survival. The mother love we seek cannot be attained from another individual.

It is only Elise who, in deciding to step into her own power and let go of attachments, truly ascends. In *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*, Maureen Murdoch discusses the heroine's departure from the common world:

During the road of trials a woman transcends the limits of her conditioning. It is a particularly harrowing time, an adventure fraught with fears, tears, and trauma. As a child and adolescent she is shaped to fit a role determined by expectations of parents, teachers and friends. To move beyond them she must flee the captors of her conditioning, leave the Garden of Protection behind, and slay the dragon of her dependencies and self-doubts (Murdock 63).

Leaving the "Garden of Protection" is a great risk for Elise. Much is lost. However, in making a decision and holding it fast, she honours the call of her soul – a space where the Mother *truly* lies. Furthermore, the power of this action, of her personal honouring, can become a guiding light for those around her. Joseph Campbell might coin this light as the "Return," the point at which the hero shares the wisdom attained on his journey with the world. In many ways, Elise's sharing of her wisdom is in her action, in her departure.

It is not an action met with ease. While Elise becomes the guiding light, others may

not follow initially. They will not meet their new heroine with admiration, for to them, Elise's departure overthrows their worlds, shaking expectations. But it is not Elise's responsibility to pull Lily, Paula, Gavin and Marcus along with her on her journey. In holding her family as capable of standing without her, she becomes the mentor herself, and initiates their calls to adventure. For the other characters, accepting the call would require looking away from one another and turning to their Selves. Whether or not they accept would be a different script.

In my own process, I, like Bly, found myself returning over and over to St. Anne. I was first bewitched by her while visiting the Louvre Museum in Paris. At the time, the featured exhibit was a study of da Vinci's image of the Virgin and Child with Saint Anne. I believe I too was attracted to the Ecstatic mother – to a kind of spiritual parent, one with the unconditional love we all so inherently desire. My personal writings highlight my own yearning to fulfill this need, as well as the ever-present strains between mother and child, the safety of stasis and the risks of movement:

There's St. Anne: sketch after sketch, each outline a map of hope for the purest pencil lines – my eyes in chains to da Vinci's vision of this angel figure, her arms like wings. He can't avert his gaze, stirs within the image – the child, the virgin, the saint who holds them – he can never get them *just so*, never *right enough* in all their delicacy and approaching wounding.

Sunlight descends. Mountains form in sky-toned grays; bodies bloom on a bed of stone. Her skin colours in oils on wood, slips through the slivers of her being, sheer cap bands to her head, lets the light in, garments weave to blues and reds. Her eyes take form, cast downwards –

– and the infant looks up to his mother, hands grasped firmly to the ears of the lamb – *yes, mum, yes*, he says. She reaches for him, but he wavers.

With Saint Anne's presence, the child is free, and the mother companioned as she lets him go. Perhaps we all long for an all-encompassing St. Anne – to be held in our utmost purity and potential, with all our wavering sorrows and desires.

## **GENRE STUDIES: THE FAMILY DRAMA**

I've always been attracted to family dramas. As much as I enjoy magical realism and attempt to convey it in my work, realism is and always has been more intuitive to me. I've often contemplated where this attraction to fantasy comes from when my instincts are so based in reality. The only reasoning I've come to is that, in my desire to portray authentic, honest and wise young protagonists, the pull of the surreal is not far. Similarly, mysticism and spirituality are not far from magic and fantasy.

Fantasy, magic and elements of the surreal are often seen in films with young protagonists. *Whale Rider* follows a young girl's journey for acceptance by her grandfather. To achieve this, she calls upon the spiritual help of whales. Even *The Secret Garden*, with a strong base in reality, incorporates magic through nature and the fire chant, in which the young characters bring Mary's uncle and Colin's father back home where he is needed. This act and Lord Craven's subsequent return ignite his healing and, as such, complete Mary's healing of herself and her family.

Films with young protagonists often use fantasy to contrast the dark worlds of the protagonists' realities. *Pan's Labyrinth*, set in 1944, against the backdrop of fascism,

is another example of this. This film uses a fantastical world – one only 12-year-old Ophelia experiences. Fantasy is used to portray the deep darkness, danger and loneliness of the world, and the child’s longing to cope.

Other family dramas which have inspired me include *In America* and *Bee Season*. Each follows an adult protagonist, but relies on a storyline greatly fueled by a strong child lead. Both draw on themes of healing, spirituality and spiritual longing.

It was unexpected that my protagonist would be 17 years old. As discussed, Elise’s story bloomed after experimenting with prose. A character came to life – someone to companion Lily. Then she took over the script. This was my first time dealing with a cusp-of-adulthood protagonist and my first time writing a love story. I had to draw from a new line of films which would better encapsulate the maturity and disenchantment that would come with the desire for escape, and early experiences of love. The films I looked to for this were *Before Sunrise* and, more recently, *If I Stay* and *The Fault in Our Stars*. These films’ protagonists deal internally and externally with an impending relationship that comes into conflict with the pursuit of their dreams.

Looking at these films became hugely influential in my later drafts. As I began to dig into Elise and Gavin’s relationship, I realized that I didn’t really get it; what makes us fall in love? And what is distinct about falling in love when we are young? As I scoured through these films, I reflected on my own experiences and the experiences

of those close to me. I looked for pinnacles of connection: the places our words to ourselves integrate with the words to our beloveds. What I became aware of is that love – particularly young love – blossoms in existential thought. Young love is a great place to start when stepping away from the family mold; however, young relationships typically look to fill the void created in that departure. Ultimately, we are all looking for affirmation for who we are.

Now, in less detail, I will list the corollary films that have been greatly instrumental for me while writing AUM.

### **COROLLARY FILMS**

- WHALE RIDER (2002) *For its mythology, and its rise of the heroine in a young protagonist yearning for a patriarch's affection*
- THE SECRET GARDEN (1993) *For its young protagonist, and her healing and rebirth of her new family and herself*
- VOYAGER (1991) *For its mythic qualities, and its delicacy in its story of a man unknowingly falling in love with his daughter*
- BEE SEASON (2005) *For its spiritual heart, family secrets, and the young characters seeking beneath their parents' traumas*
- BEFORE SUNRISE (1995) *For its coming-of-age relationships, dialogue, and the draw of traveling through Europe*

- THE FAULT IN OUR STARS (2014) *For its teen romance, existentialism and current relevance*
- BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA (2007) *For its representation of childhood, friendship, tragedy alongside imagination and fantasy*



## **THE FUTURE OF AUM**

### **PRESENT STORY ISSUES AND FUTURE REWRITES**

If there's one thing I know and live as a writer, it is that the process is never "finished": while an individual story might have a beginning and an ending, I see writing and storytelling as cyclical. Each time round it is different, consumes itself and creates something greater. To me, story is infinity.

Now, less abstractly, I see AUM as a work in progress. There are still elements which need expanding and elaborating. Right now, I think the spiritual aspects of the story still need work. The potential for depth is there, but perhaps doesn't come across as well as it needs to. Perhaps this is because the Hinduism and Kundalini aspects do not yet come through prevalently. I've hesitated because my own knowledge is not as deep as it can be. There are more opportunities to elaborate on this area, as well as write more thematic "snakes" into the mix. I want the world to hold greater power in its thematic resonance in the story.

Furthermore, I see flaws Charlotte's storyline, in so far as it is not yet a fully realized storyline. Structurally, I need to write Charlotte's story beats in an action/reaction form. Right now, I've focused on Elise, as needed. But Charlotte's story needs to be

there. I think her storyline is perfect for a “B” – a lot is at stake for her. Her world can also give more insight into Marcus’s world.

The indirectness of Charlotte’s storyline also presents another issue: the antecedent action. I think there are perhaps ways in which I can communicate what happened between Paula and Marcus which haven’t been tried yet. While I don’t want their story to take over Elise’s story, I need to find a balance between their story and how it authorizes Gavin, Elise and Lily’s stories.

It is also important for me to give more attention to Elise’s storyline. While I hear her voice in my head as I write, it is not always apparent that her objective is the driving force of the story. There are a lot of characters in AUM, and Elise’s objective needs to be the most notable and the strongest determinant in the storyline.

More concretely, I need to increase the beats of financial instability and the possibility of Social Services taking Lily. Those two elements will add a lot of tension to the overall story.

I intend to focus my subsequent drafts in Charlotte’s story, Elise’s pursuit of her dreams and the spiritual depth. The process of writing so far has given me a great understanding of my characters and the story’s overall unity. Ultimately, writing AUM has given me a greater understanding of myself. Now, there is further integration to transpire. As I go through the next rewrites, I plan to focus on specific

aspects I know need more attention: Elise's spirituality, Charlotte and Marcus's storyline, presence and communication of antecedent action, and spiritual "snakes" in the story overall. I think with a keen, detailed attention to these aspects, *Aum, She Who is Most Auspicious* can be told in a unified way.

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