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DAUGHTERS LEAVING MOTHERS:
Family Bonds as Structural Patterns in Anita Brookner’s Novels

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1. ANITA BROOKNER: A BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

FAMILY

Anita Brookner was born on July 16, 1928.

She is a native Londoner, the only child of Polish-Jewish parents. Feelings of displacement and a sense of melancholy permeated the household in Herne Hill, a suburb of London, where Brookner’s family lived. The reason was based on their Jewish heritage and the awareness of being foreigners.

Brookner rarely gives interviews, yet when she does she is brutally candid about her private life and disarmingly honest. She explained to an interviewer:

I was brought up to look after my parents. My family were Polish Jews and we lived with my grandmother, with uncles and aunts and cousins all around, and I thought everybody lived like that. They were transplanted and fragile people, an unhappy brood, and I felt that I had to protect them. Indeed that is what they expected. As a result I became an adult too soon and paradoxically never grew up.¹

This sense of displacement she inherited from her family, “I doubt that you ever get away from the people before you […] I have never learned the custom of the country, because we were Jews, tribal and alien”² she told Olga Kenyon in an interview. Her own story she summarized in a few words to John Haffenden - “I’ve never been at home here. […] I nursed my parents until they died: it’s a dreary, Victorian story, with this added complication of not being

English”. In fact, according to her parent’s wishes it was their daughter’s duty to look after them.

Her parents were “a virtuous couple and very unhappy”. Brookner’s father was called with the English name Newson Brookner as it was not possible to pronounce his Polish Christian name. Born Bruckner he had come to England when he was sixteen and then he changed his name to Brookner in response to anti-Jewish feelings. He was “a small businessman, extremely virtuous, not very successful”. During the First World War he fought for the British army and then he joined his wife’s family firm. The main characters of “Latecomers” are people in exile and Brookner has compared one of them with her father - “I suppose Fibich is rather like my own father: a lonely man, troubled”. Her father loved walking around London and going with his daughter (he) went to the National Gallery. They used to read a lot of books including Dickens. Brookner has said, “My father, who didn’t really understand the English, loved Dickens; he thought Dickens gave a true picture of England, where right always triumphed”. She also told Brown that her father was unhappy because her mother was unhappy as, “she thought she married the wrong man”.

She was called Maude Schiska. Her father had come from Warsaw very young and then he had set a tobacco-import business in England. She was very

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5 Ibid. p. 1.
beautiful and starting a career as a singer of lieder and ballads. Brookner recalled her mother’s singing as, “Sentimental stuff - but there was enormous passion behind it”.\(^9\) She had toured in America and Canada and she had to renounce her professional career when she married. Brookner remembered that she used to entertain her friends in the drawing room, “and when she sang my father became restless and I would begin to cry: the nurse would take me away. It was the passion in the voice which showed”,\(^10\) and explains her emotions, “I could sense some sort of hurt in that voice: nostalgia, longing – longing that was it”.\(^11\) In her fifth novel “Family and Friends” Brookner wanted to write about her mother’s family. She said that the character of Mimi was her mother, “the good daughter, who stayed at home […] a pattern for all daughters who stay at home”,\(^12\) for whom Brookner feels “immense compassion”\(^13\). Meditating on this Brookner has arrived at a conclusion: “she, not I, should have been the liberated woman”.\(^14\) About her parents Brookner said that she:

> loved them painfully, but they were fairly irascible and unreliable people. They should never have had children; they didn’t understand children and couldn’t be bothered…they were mismatched, strong-willed, hot tempered, with a very great residual sadness which I’ve certainly inherited. We never had much fun.\(^15\)

\(^12\) O. Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk*, cit., p. 18.
\(^13\) Ibid. p. 18.
\(^15\) J. Haffenden, *op. cit.*, p.60.
Nevertheless her parents lived together their lifetime and as Brookner said:

everything was kept under control. [My mother] was well behaved. They both were: silent, stoical and I think very unhappy. They made each other lonely, because they were ill-matched. But everyone remarked on their devotion to each other. And their loyalty and their piety are indeed object lessons.  

They thus provided a stable setting for their child, which she has recalls as, “an ordinary middle-class, suburban upbringing, with a comfortable house and a good school”.  

When War broke out, Anita Brookner was eleven and her house was filled with refugees from Germany who were employed as servants and maids. Even though her family protected her against the terrible things that were happening in occupied Europe she was even too aware of the anxiety, the sense of fear, impending disaster and desperation surrounding her.  
The focus of Brookner’s extended family was her Polish grandmother, a matriarch who ruled everything and whose - “decrees and anathemas were not to be questioned”  

There was a lot of tension among the family members and no change of mood went unregistered. Brookner recalled:

I thought it was ridiculous at the time. Now I think it’s enviable, that sort of closeness – though it can also be imprisoning. It wasn’t entirely

harmonious either. By the time the firm had been inherited by my bachelor uncle, he and my father hated each other. My father was a very good son-in-law, but his status in the firm was slightly subordinate, and my bachelor uncle was a horrible man: short-tempered, frustrated, very spoilt. And this created tensions in the family, of which, though they were invisible, I was very aware. And then the aunts, a sister-in-law and cousins, greedy gossiping women, who visited frequently and whom I disliked.\(^{19}\)

Brookner could escape from this oppressive family atmosphere through school and art. School was felt a liberation for her, “It was sweetness and light out there. Everyone was so normal. They behaved predictably. They were so good-humoured and friendly. I had to rearrange myself after a day at school, before I went in”.\(^{20}\) Art - “provided another world. A better world. The Dulwich Picture Gallery was nearby, and she would spend every Sunday afternoon there”.\(^{21}\) She then discovered the National Gallery and subsequently studied at the Courtauld Institute of Arts. When she won a scholarship to Paris a life-shaping break with her parents and family occurred. Thus she recalled the three years that she spent in Paris:

It was the beginning of the world for me, leaving behind this contentious atmosphere at home and discovering a great city. But also a tremendous wrench. My mother wept. It was decided I was ungrateful and all the rest of it. There was that awful longing: Please Come Home. And every time

\(^{19}\) B. Morrison, *op. cit.*, p.1.
\(^{20}\) Ibid. p.1.
my mother got ill after that, it was blamed on my having gone away. They were restless in that respect.\textsuperscript{22}

In Paris she lived very happily, spending enriching years far from England and her parents, even though she recalled, “I felt cut off from them, and I was very unhappy about that. I just knew I wanted to do it. There, it’s the original conflict – what you want and what you’re told to do are two different things”;\textsuperscript{23} “It’s an instinct, to save your own life at some point. I think I knew I’d be unhappy if I stayed at home”.\textsuperscript{24} Her parents did not approve of her going away, her mother feared that she would never marry, as Brookner remembers:

\begin{quote}
I was always wary of my parents’ plans for me. […] It was thought I’d do something trivial for a couple of years and then get married. In fact it was my duty to do that. So I did the other thing. And I had to pay for it. When I was in Paris I was literally starving because my parents wouldn’t allow me any money: I had no allowance of any kind. They held out for a long time. Because I’d deserted them.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

But she said that she loved Paris instantly and that she has never been so happy as when she was there, living in a hotel and completely immersed in her work, visiting every gallery and museum with no other responsibilities. Her mother was ill by then and when her father died she was obliged to look after her mother. She told Guppy, “I had no choice, I was not free until she died too.”\textsuperscript{26} In

\begin{footnotes}
\item[22] B. Morrison, \textit{op. cit.}, p.1.
\item[25] Ibid, p.1.
\end{footnotes}
fact, Brookner had to put her own life aside and nurse her mother for ten years and what she felt was - “a terrible sadness at seeing a life winding down and being unable to do anything about it”. 27 When her mother died, in 1969, she had forgiven her daughter because, as Brookner said, she:

came to realise that, had I been married, I wouldn’t have been so available. There was an irony there. Though there was still a degree of thinking this was a ludicrous way for a woman to behave – the shadows of spinster, schoolteacher: they all thought in those stereotyped terms, I’m afraid. 28

When she became a teacher at the Courtauld Institute of Fine Arts her father too had expressed relief, “because although I was disgraced, and unmarried, I was salaried and in effect I’d done something right. A sort of minimal appreciation then became possible: someone must have thought I was all right”. 29

Anita Brookner has never married even though she seriously wished for marriage and children. What emerges from her interviews is that she would have wanted a family of her own with a husband and children but that that would have meant giving up her work. Also she was aware of her parents’ unhappy union and she had - “no desire to be taken over” by a man. 30 She said that she had had proposals but that she did not accept them. She told Brown - “I chose the wrong people, and the wrong people chose me. So it never came

28 Ibid. p.1.
29 Ibid. p.1.
30 M. Brown, op. cit., p.1.
about. At the time that was a cause of great sadness, certainly”,31 and to Haffenden:

I only ever wanted children, six sons… I wanted characters quite different from myself. I wanted to get away from my own family and to be absorbed in another, more regular set-up, instead of being this grown-up orphan with what you call success.32

She also told Blake - “I possibly never met anyone to whom I could really entrust my life. I suppose it stems from early childhood”.33

SCHOOL AND CAREER

Anita Brookner has devoted a life to art and literature, and says now that - “the great writers of fiction, more than anyone else, are sorts of saints to the lay person. They’ve been there, they’ve done it, they’ve produced these marvellous things. I can’t think of anything more noble”.34

Anita Brookner attended James Allen’s School for Girls, in Dulwich and she then studied at King’s College, in London. After gaining a BA in history from King’s College she gained a doctorate in art history at the Courtauld Institute of Fine Arts. She specialised in the French art of the Enlightenment.

31 Ibid. p.1.
32 Haffenden, op. cit., p.65.
33 B. Morrison, op. cit., p.1.
In 1950 she obtained a French government scholarship to study at the Ecole du Louvre in Paris where she researched for her doctoral thesis on Greuze.

When she returned from Paris she taught art history at Reading University and in 1964 she became lecturer, then reader at the Courtauld and she has taught there for 25 years.

In 1967 she was elected Slade Professor of Art History at Cambridge, the first woman ever to hold that position.

She was a brilliant and inspirational teacher, extraordinarily good at helping her students blossom, and bringing out what was really good in them.\textsuperscript{35} She retired in 1988, when she was 60.

In 1981 she wrote her first novel \textit{A start in life} and since then she has published 24 novels even though she already was an internationally recognized art historian on eighteenth and nineteenth-century French art and she had produced studies of Greuze, David, and Watteau and a book of essays, \textit{The Genius of the Future} on poets and writers as art critics.

In 1984 she was awarded the Booker McConnell Prize for \textit{Hotel du Lac}, her fourth novel.

In 1989 she received an honorary doctorate of letters from Smith College, Boston, MA, in the United States, and from the university of Loughborough in Britain.

She still lives in London.

\textsuperscript{35} M. Brown, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 1.
1.2 ANITA BROOKNER AND THE UNAVOIDABLE MATTER OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Anita Brookner has been accused of writing to a formula, even though one of her own creation. She has also been accused of rewriting always the same book and that she “is” the heroine she creates. Thus, her detractors imply that autobiography is the disguised genre of her novels.

In 1984, when Haffenden asked Brookner if the first three novels she had written were autobiographical she replied that, although the particulars were “all invented”, they did “speak of states of mind which forced me to do something about those states of mind”.\(^{36}\) She defined those early novels as “impure novels” opposing them to Hotel du Lac which she described as the least impure, a matter of “invention pure and simple”. According to Skinner the implication is that “the earlier novels were not merely invention, but consciously mediated autobiography”,\(^{37}\) arguing that emphasis on a single character, as it is for Ruth in A Start in Life, Kitty in Providence and Frances in Look at Me, is the most obvious characteristic of autobiographical writing.\(^{38}\)

There have been many attempts to single out episodes in Brookner’s life that resonate her novels with her life and this is a dimension of Brookner’s fiction which remains ambiguous and which can hardly be ignored.

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\(^{38}\) J. Skinner, cit. p. 12.
The interviews I have been able to read range over 25 years, from 1984 to 2009, when Brookner gave her last interview to date. They are interesting and revealing for various reasons, there Brookner comments on aspects regarding her work as a novelist including her own ideas about the elements that may be regarded as autobiographical in her novels.

Yet, Skinner thinks the verbal slips which occur in the interviews, as being more interesting than anything else, as forms of Brookner’s unconscious identification with fictional characters, arguing that, “certain intimate fictional portraits (neurasthenic Frances or ideologically ambivalent Edith) are indirectly more revealing than the generally well-crafted comments of the polished interview subject”.\(^\text{39}\) Even though Skinner’s aim was not to categorize Brookner’s novels as “autobiographical” or to isolate the autobiographical element in them, he has nonetheless devoted the final chapter of his study on Anita Brookner to the whole subject of autobiography, where he pursues this rhetorical conflation: “if fiction may be “autobiographical”, than autobiography may be “fictional”.”\(^\text{40}\)

Let us turn to the interviews. The twenty-five-year span of the interviews offer an opportunity to learn from Brookner’s own words her mind about certain subjects and the changes over the years.

In 1987, when she was interviewed for *The Paris Review*, she was already aware of being accused of writing to a formula. It is because her novels share a similarity in form, especially those written in the 1980s, and they are short

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\(^{39}\) Ibid. p. 12.

\(^{40}\) Ibid. p. 12.
novels of about two hundred pages with a single (especially female) protagonist, who is mentally or ethnically an outsider. Plots are very simple, with similar themes and a similar London setting. Historical and political events, except for the Holocaust, remain outside the context of the story. The focus on the mentally thought processes of single characters. There are not formulaic happy endings but instead unhappy or shocking ones. This can lead to the conclusion that Brookner rejected optimism, preferring instead a bleak world filled with depressed heroines. There were mixed reviews for those novels, ranging from good to hostile, even abusive criticism.

All the early novels focus on love. For this reason Brookner has been accused of masking sentimentality in an aura of seriousness,\(^{41}\) implying that her novels should be equated to Mills & Boon sentimental novels of Mary Stewart and Barbara Cartland. Brookner herself explained the difference to Guppy:

\begin{quote}
Romance novels are formula novels. I have read some and they seem to be writing about a different species. The true romantic novel is about delayed happiness; the pilgrimage you go through to get that imagined happiness. In the genuine romantic novel there is confrontation with truth and in the “romance” novel a similar confrontation with a surrogate, plastic version of the truth. […] To remain pure a novel has to cast a moral puzzle. Anything else is mere negotiation.\(^{42}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{41}\) Ibid. p. 7.
Brookner’s aspirations instead move towards Stendhal, who embodies for her the true romantic hero. Reviewing the French novelist’s biography by Robert Alter she comments:

If Stendhal joins up at all with the more standard Romantic dreamers it is because he shares with them the fantasy of the supreme emotional adventure. If he surpasses them, it is because he knows how to convince us, by extraordinary means, that this is actually taking place.\(^{43}\)

In 1984 she told Haffenden: “Romanticism is not just a mode it, literally enters into every life”,\(^{44}\) then subsequently she used the same sentence with Kenyon changing the word “enters” and adding a revealing personal comment - “Romanticism is not just a mode; it literally eats into every life. Women will never get rid of just waiting for the right man”.\(^{45}\) According to Skinner the operative words “eats into” have a connotation “of blight or cancer” aligning them with - “the common cliché of “the incurable romantic” an etiology that will invariably underlie [Brookner’s] fiction”\(^{46}\).

In 1994 she told another interviewer: “Well, I am a spinster, I make no apologies for that. But I’m neither unhappy nor lonely”.\(^{47}\)

At the time of that interview Brookner was still thinking that she was creating different stories with different characters but in 2009 she told Brown, “I think

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\(^{43}\) *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 March 1980.

\(^{44}\) Haffenden, *op. cit.*, p.69.


\(^{46}\) J. Haffenden, *op. cit.*, p.10.

one keeps on writing the same book over and over again”, $^{48}$ and when Brown told her that it was what her critics were saying she simply replied that it was true. In fact, her 24 novels if read one after the other convey the idea of one monolithic fiction even though the author herself was probably unaware of this when she wrote every single novel, and in each novel its protagonist advances in age and knowledge.

But still the assumption remains that those novels are a depiction of Brookner’s own personality and of her own story. Brown wrote in his interview - “Brookner lives alone. She has never married and the preponderance of disappointed spinsters in her books has inevitably tended to give rise to the assumption that she is that person”. $^{49}$ It was in 1984 that she had told Haffenden: “I feel I could get into the Guinness Book of Records as the world’s loneliest, most miserable woman”, $^{50}$ yet Brown remarks that, “It is only when you meet her that you can hear the dry, amused, worldly tone that must have informed that sentence as she said it”. $^{51}$

A private persona and a public persona coexist in Brookner as woman and writer. Also Blake remarked the - “playfulness, wit and strength about Anita Brookner” beyond her public persona, $^{52}$ in fact, Brookner told him: “It pleases me to play the old lady card. It’s quite useful at times. But if it were true, it

$^{49}$ Ibid. p. 1.
$^{50}$ J. Haffenden, op. cit., p.75.
$^{52}$ B. Morrison, op. cit., p.1.
wouldn’t be a card, would it? I’d feel sorry for myself. Which I don’t think I do”.53

Brookner finds interviews futile because, as she told Guppy, “they always get it wrong”.54 In *The Paris Review* interview she had also told that she thought - “[English critics] had made the initial mistake of identifying [her] with [her] female protagonists”, so that that criticism “is a semipersonal kind that does not rank as real criticism”55, and bad reviews of Brookner’s novels are partly intended as a dislike of her since she is supposed to be all those women she creates.

Yet the ambiguity remains from the start because when Haffenden had asked her if her heroines were herself in quite a strict sense she replied that she thought so, even though she was not in a position to tell it. Of one thing she was sure: “one has to use one’s own life; one has no other material”.56

At the core of Anita Brookner’s writing lies the aim of editing experience, her own personal experience as a human being. What she does is that she uses those personal experiences frames and shapes them to a form, in order to be able to understand certain events and why they happened, as well as to create a work of art in itself. She says that she does not possess imagination, which is very rare, but that only possesses certain powers of inventive as everybody else, so that she has to use what is at her disposal.

Her first novel, *A Start in Life* was autobiographical; as she said Guppy:

53 Ibid. p.1.
56 J. Haffenden, op. cit., p. 18.
I wrote it in a moment of sadness and desperation. My life seemed to be drifting in predictable channels and I wanted to know how I deserved such a fate. I thought if I could write about it I would be able to impose some structure on my experience. It gave me a feeling of being at least in control. It was an exercise in self-analysis, and I tried to make it as objective as possible – no self-pity and no self-justification. But what is interesting about self-analysis is that it leads nowhere – it is an art form in itself”.  

To Haffenden she said that she saw her novels as “extraordinary accidents” and that she certainly had not - “modelled them on anybody or anything”.  

She said instead that she had used - “certain situations; not characters but situations, situations out of time, taken from twenty years ago, and nothing that could possibly have reverberations today”. 

I think this is the point of Brookner’s writing: she wanted to “edit” her own experience and she expresses it by writing about her own experience and its significance instead of describing and giving an account of the futile details. For Brookner writing novels as a form of “editing experience” is - “getting it out in terms of form, because it is form that’s going to save us all, and the sooner we realize it the better”. Those experiences expressed in terms of form are precisely her novels and what they are about.

58 J. Haffenden, op. cit., p. 68.
59 Ibid. p.68.
60 Ibid. p.74.
1.3 ANITA BROOKNER’S INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

Sadler Veach wrote that:

Brookner is not light reading. Readers must be literate and must, for full appreciation of her allusiveness, have some acquaintance with the legacy of great British, Russian, and French novels and know some French. She believes, with Milton, that all of us face choices minute by minute and moral choices at least hour by hour.\(^{61}\)

Brookner said that she had always read a lot of fiction and that her sentimental education came mostly from fiction.\(^{62}\) When she studied French at university she used to read an enormous number of French novelists and her influences were Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert. Stendhal was the one she loved most because he was the true romantic. She loved Zola for his courage. Proust has been very precious to her. He was the one who remained always marginal, observing, in a childlike state of receptivity and “who got it right all the time”. She also read the German romantics and the great Russians. *Oblomov* is her favourite novel, it is about a man who fails at everything from sheer inactivity and she said that she learned a terrific lesson there. Dickens is part of her childhood mythology; she likes his indignation at the unfairness of things. She also likes Henry James and Edith Wharton for the moral conscience in their novels, George Eliot for moral seriousness, and Trollope for “decent” feelings.

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\(^{62}\) See Haflenden, Guppy, Kenyon and Brown.
She said James wrote about scruples and innocence betrayed which is reflected in what she told Haffenden: “I think if my novels are about anything positive, they are about not playing tricks”. To Brown she said that her books are about betrayal to a certain extent, the betrayal of trust or affections within a relationship and also about the betrayal of life’s promise and of literature itself.

The truth she is trying to convey is a peeling away of affectation, trying to get behind the façade. Moral rectitude in Brookner’s characters comes from a grounding in the nineteenth-century novel and because her own family were very strict in that respect. She has never unlearned those lessons and she now regrets it. She is incapable of being plausible, flattering, dishonest so she is handicapped by her own expectations and by the idea implanted by Dickens in her childhood that right will always triumph.

Brookner also reads contemporary fiction and says that among the writers she admires there are Philip Roth, Rosamond Lehman, Jean Rhys, Mavis Gallant and Edith de Born.

She told Haffenden that the wit and humour in her novels come from a lot of reading - “here is the connection between art history and fiction: it’s the energy of the eighteenth century I admire. If you have a cause, you have to propound it with energy. My “cause” is to tell a story”.

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63 J. Haffenden, op. cit., p.12.
64 M. Brown, op. cit., p.1.
65 J. Haffenden, op. cit., p. 59.
“We expect Brookner to be well read”, wrote Sadler Veach, “but the range she has covered is unusual even for a don who combines expertise in art history and an interest in literature”.66

1.4 ANITA BROOKNER’S WRITING

When her first novel *A Start in Life* was published, Anita Brookner was 53 years old. She could be defined a late starter even though she had also already published art history books and at that time her career as a don and as an academic was well established.

On a summer holiday in 1980 Brookner decided “to try her hand at a novel”, just to know how it was done and to see if she could do it. She felt compelled to do so because her retirement was looming and she was getting stale as a teacher.67

She told Olga Kenyon that she began her first novel - “out of boredom and the wish to review [her] life, which seemed to be drifting in predictable channels. [She] saw it as a little exercise in self-analysis” and to John Haffenden she said that the reason why she had written novels was - “penitential and possibly useful”.68

I started writing because of a terrible feeling of powerlessness: I felt I was drifting and obscure, and I rebelled against that. I didn’t see what I

66 L. Sadler Veach, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
could do to change my condition. I wanted to control rather than be controlled, to ordain rather than be ordained, and to relegate rather than be relegated.\(^{69}\)\(^{70}\)

In 2009, she explained to Mick Brown that she thought that, “if [she] could write about it [she] would be able to impose some structure on [her] experience”, suggesting that it was also a way to give structure to her life.\(^{71}\)

Brookner has defined her writing in various ways in her interviews along the years. To Haffenden she said that writing novels was “a kind of first-aid when [she] found [herself] in a disagreeable state of will, paralysed” which worked momentarily. “[She] felt alone, abandoned, excluded, and it was no good moping. It was a gamble” she added.\(^{72}\)

She has also described her writing fiction as - “trying very hard to remember something which has not yet taken place”, “an exercise in self-analysis, without self-pity or self-justification”, “an experiment, something that turned out to be sort of companionable, a nice thing to do”, “a way of working through a problem”, “displacement activity” and “a sort of antidote to raw action”.

She told an interviewer that the source of her ideas is mostly dreams and memories and a certain amount of observation, a feature that characterizes Brookner all too well.\(^{73}\)

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\(^{71}\) M. Brown, op. cit., p.1.

\(^{72}\) J. Haffenden, op. cit., p. 74.

\(^{73}\) R. McCrum, op. cit., p.1.
Brookner has repeatedly defined herself as a marginal person, passive, like blotting paper and an observer, and in this case writing has had a vital function for her reabsorbing and redirecting all the attention that [had] been wasted by too much listening and watching.\textsuperscript{74}

At the beginning of Brookner’s career as a writer was a painful process for her, associated with feelings of loneliness. Brookner declared that she did not enjoy it. She had defined this process as “conversion hysteria” talking with Haffenden in 1984 “it’s a very perverse energy which has gone into the novels – conversion hysteria, I would say. If I could say it, I would; as I can’t say it, I have to write it”.\textsuperscript{75} She subsequently explained in detail to Kenyon:

There’s a terrible exhilaration, like having a high fever, which comes on me. Writing is my form of taking a sedative. It’s almost a physiological process. When I’m actually writing, I feel so fantastically well. I even put on weight – and when it’s all over, I feel ill.\textsuperscript{76}

To Haffenden, Brookner also said that being an academic and a novelist were activities outside the natural order, that “[she] only ever wanted children, six sons”.\textsuperscript{77} Yet, when she gave the interview for The Paris Review two years later she had partially changed her mind. In fact, commenting on a sentence of Look at Me saying that, “writing was [her] penance for not being lucky” she told Guppy:

\textsuperscript{74} O. Kenyon, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{75} J. Haffenden, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{76} O. Kenyon, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{77} J. Haffenden, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 62
writing is a very lonely activity. You go for days without seeing or talking to anyone. And all the time out there people are living happy, fulfilled lives – or you think they are. If I were happy, married with six children, I wouldn’t be writing. And I doubt if I should want to. But since I wrote that sentence I have changed. Now I write because I enjoy it. Writing has freed me from the despair of living. I feel well when I am writing. \(^{78}\)

Then, in 2001, when she was interviewed for her book *The Bay of Angels* she declared - “it came upon me quite suddenly and quite easily and I enjoyed writing it. I’m sorry if it’s very bleak. I’m sorry if it’s mournful. I had a good time, that’s all I can say about it”, thus acknowledging that writing is now a pleasure for the author. \(^{79}\)

During the years writing became something Brookner felt - “more ardently contracted to do”. In 1989 she said, “It’s serious now. It didn’t bother me in the old days – I did as well as I could, and was satisfied with it. But now – I want more. I want to do more. I want to do better work – much better work”. \(^{80}\)

In fact, seriousness, aligned with moral rectitude, is a conscious concern in Brookner’s writing. It comes from her own family strictness but also on her grounding in the nineteenth-century novel. From her rigorous and complicated parents she has - “learned sad truths quite early, and [she has] never really got out of those coils – that life is a serious and ultimately saddening business”. \(^{81}\)

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\(^{81}\) J. Haffenden, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
This is what she described as a desire to write to tell the truth: “the Cassandra Complex”.

What matters most in Brookner’s writing is her intent in doing her writing but how she does it is interesting to the understanding of the woman writer. To Guppy who asked her about her style which was praised for its elegance and originality, Brookner said that she was not conscious of having a style, but that she was instead writing easily and thinking about what words want to say. Respect for form and lucidity are her only conscious preoccupations.

Brookner has always written in longhand, in one draft. She never revises nor rewrites, except for the final chapter, which she may alter or lengthen. She writes for two or three hours, in the morning, and then she spends the rest of the day thinking about her stories.

In fact, Brookner said that her stories arrive “ready-cooked”, encoded from some unconscious source”.\(^{82}\) She is a great believer in unconscious processes, admiring Freud and thinking that “all of his conclusions are correct”.\(^{83}\) Her own writing could be seen as a form of self-analysis or self-examination. But once a book is finished she reaches no conclusions, no revelations, analysis thus becoming a work of art in itself, shaped and finished. She has had to keep on writing during the years, writing being, in itself, a form of self-therapy. To Kenyon she said that her books are accidents of the unconscious, and that the process of self-examination leads to discover truths one did not know existed. “You never know what you will learn till you start writing” she told Kenyon,

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“it’s like dredging, really, seeing if you can keep it going”. Even though having suffered from depression, due to her parent’s death and serious disappointments in love, Brookner has never undergone psychoanalysis. She thought that those periods of depression even when they had been long had been quite nourishing because one is very receptive when one is in that state, a state she defines as “invaluable”.

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84 O. Kenyon, *op. cit.*, p.11.
2. A START IN LIFE

‘Accounts must always be rendered, if only to oneself’

A Start in Life was published in 1981. In the United States its title was changed into The Debut, taken from a novel by Balzac Un Début dans la Vie.

It is centred on the character of Ruth Weiss and tells her story from early childhood to the age of twenty-two.

Ruth is the only child of George, of German descent, owner of a rare bookshop and Helen, an English actress. They live in London, in Oakwood Court, together with George’s mother and Ruth’s nurse. The grandmother, after whom Ruth is named, is the only person in the family who takes care of the child. She is the one who cooks the meals, runs the household and presides over the kitchen. Ruth’s parents are selfish, egocentric, self-absorbed and they both ignore their daughter. When the grandmother dies, Mrs. Cutler, a widow, replaces her role in the house but she proves as ineffective as Ruth’s parents.

Still a child, Ruth learns to cook her own meals and comforts herself with books. Feeling unsafe at home, Ruth escapes the morbid homely atmosphere through school and literature and is very good at French. School becomes her real house, a place where she feels safe and protected and where regular meals are granted. Growing up she starts avoiding her house as much as possible, and she passes instead her time at the library, or she walks to pass the time. As a young woman she falls in love with Richard Hirst, seen by her as a kind of

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semi-god, thus she rents a flat in Edith Grove and moves there hoping to cook a dinner for him and win his love. The evening of the dinner Richard arrives hours late, the food Ruth has prepared for him is ruined and she is physically and mentally exhausted. Indifferent towards her and bored, he accuses her of being selfish. Caught in despair, Ruth is incapable of understanding what has gone wrong and she goes back to Oakwood Court where she finds herself in the previous role of servant in her own house and pays rent to her parents. In Paris on a scholarship, she first lives with an old couple, the Wilcoxes, in a maid’s room, leading a life which is a sort of extension of the reduced one she used to lead at home. But one day she meets a young couple, Hugh and Jill Dixon, and she feels her luck changing. She blossoms, her looks improve. She cuts her hair and buys new fashionable clothes. For the first time in her life, she feels free, full of hope and expectations, and meets a potential new lover, Professor Duplessis, a married man, with daughters the same age as Ruth, and old enough to be her father. Once again, she moves to a flat of her own and rehearses the preparation of a special cake for him. When everything is ready, the flat furnished, the cake perfected, she invites Duplessis for tea to celebrate what she thinks to be the start of her new life. That same evening she receives a call from her mother who wants her to come back home. What has happened is that Mrs. Cutler wants to marry again and thus will leave Oakwood Court. Needing a servant to replace her with, Ruth is called back to duty to take her place as caretaker. At home, Helen discovers her husband’s infidelity and wants to go away from home. She dies in a taxi with Ruth. After the death of
her mother Ruth marries to fulfil her father’s wishes but, after six months only, her husband dies and she is bound to remain in London to take care of her father. She becomes an academic specializing in Balzac.

As Skinner states, “the apparent banality of Ruth’s story cannot possibly reflect the skill and wit with which it is presented”, and Malcolm Alexander underlines the fact that A Start in Life is “much about endings as beginnings for its protagonists”. In fact, the novel is characterized by a circular pattern that obsessively repeats itself. It is narrated in the third-person “that is remarkably first-person”, as it is Ruth herself who “tells” her story, but there are also authorial comments.

The novel begins and ends when Ruth is forty, an authority on Balzac, and living passionately only in the fictional world of literature, even though the opening words of the novel are “Dr. Weiss, at forty, knew that her life had been ruined by literature”. Ruth attempts to make a start in life with an overinvestment in love, first with Richard and then with Duplessis, but both are destined to failure. She is called back home from Paris, “at precisely that moment when she is about to embark

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86 J. Skinner, op. cit., p. 25.
88 L. Veach Sadler, op. cit., p. 11.
89 A. Brookner, A Start … cit., p. 7.
on another route altogether”.⁹⁰ As a result, her start in life is “an abortive one”.⁹¹

From childhood, Ruth lacks her parents’ love and care and the only alternative she has at her disposal, as a child, lies in books. The child turns to books relying on them, treating them as her best friends, the whole fictional world of literature, thus, becoming her real family. This is the origin of Ruth’s misunderstanding of literature in her life.

As a young adult she still thinks in terms of fiction and she learns how to love, and acts how she thinks a woman in love behaves, from books, not from real life. Grounding her thoughts, actions and decisions as if she were living in a fictional reality, and consequently acting in the real world as if she were in a book, she misunderstands both literature and reality.

At forty, Ruth knows that her life was ‘ruined by literature’ due to an error in judgement leading to its misunderstanding. She is also aware that the “faulty moral education” has contributed to this,⁹² which is the legacy of her parents.

To express Ruth’s lack of care and affection and her ways to cope with it and compensate it, throughout the whole novel, Brookner uses two major stylistic devices: literary analogy, paralleling fictional heroines with the life of Ruth, and food symbolism.

As Cheryl Malcolm Alexander writes:

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The importance of literature to Brookner’s protagonists is a common feature and never more so than in her first four novels. [...] These four rely heavily on intertextual elements to produce parallels between the fate of Brookner’s protagonists and the fate of protagonists in the books in their possession. [...] The virtual model for them all is Ruth.93

From the start of the novel, Brookner places the stories of Ruth and Cinderella in opposition to one another, adding only later the story of Eugénie Grandet.

In the world of fables good behaviour is rewarded and bad behaviour punished, but this is not what happens in Ruth’s story. 

*Cinderella*’s story is the original one in Ruth’s life and its charm on the child starts even before the implications of the influences of her parents and their “faulty moral education”, exactly “when, at an unremembered moment in her extreme infancy, she had fallen asleep, enraptured, as her nurse breathed the words, ‘Cinderella shall go to the ball’.”94 Through *Cinderella*, Ruth absorbs the fascination of life’s promise of happiness, but even though *A Start in Life* has a fairy-tale start, “unlike Cinderella Ruth Weiss is never rescued by a Prince Charming”,95 and for Ruth the ball never materializes.

Although *A Start in Life* is an English novel, written by an English writer, it draws “explicitly on another tradition, that of French Realism exemplified by the novels of Balzac”,96 and Ruth “is the first in a succession of Brookner females with a special relationship to France and French culture”.97

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97 Ibid., p. 29.
Many other literary references over the novel include *David Copperfield*, *Little Dorritt* and *A Tale of Two Cities* by Dickens, Tolstoj’s *Anna Karenina*, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, *Le Misanthrope* by Molière, *Phèdre* by Racine, Hugo and de Vigny, whose stories echo, parallel and highlight that of Ruth. Since Childhood, Ruth had been expected “to grow up as fast as she could decently manage it, and to this end was supplied with sad but improving books”. Her first readings are thus fairytales by Grimm and Andersen and then Dickens. From the start of her life, those books teach Ruth “virtue would surely triumph, patience would surely be rewarded”. At the beginning of the first chapter Ruth “ponders the careers of Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary, but […] she emulates those of David Copperfield and Little Dorritt”, “the incarnations of unwanted child and self-denying daughter”. Those definitions suit Ruth too, who is first an unwanted child, ignored after birth, and reduced to a foundling within her own house, living both as an outsider and a servant.

Among the web of literary references and allusions the most important one is that to *Eugénie Grandet*.

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98 A. Brookner, *A Start …*, cit., p. 11.
99 Ibid., p. 11.
100 Ibid., p. 7.
In *A Start in Life*, Ruth Weiss is revising her life, pondering which events befell her and how they shaped her life. The novel tells, in fact, *how* Ruth’s life was ruined by literature. The first chapter of the novel, and the final paragraph of the last one, provide the frame for Ruth’s story.

In the opening words of the novel, Dr Weiss, an academic aged forty, blames literature as to be what has ruined her life. But, actually, what she perceives as the real cause is literature’s misunderstanding, due to her parents’ moral education, which was faulty. The reading of *Eugénie Grandet* served to reveal this knowledge to her, but only too late to be of help.

Yet, Dr Weiss is aware that this is only partially the truth:

> But really it had started much earlier than that, when, at an unremembered moment in her extreme infancy, she had fallen asleep, enraptured, as her nurse breathed the words, ‘Cinderella shall go to the ball’.

> The ball had never materialized.\(^{102}\)

The fact that the ball never materializes in Ruth’s life stands for life’s promise betrayed, and those words ‘Cinderella shall go to the ball’, which are “the most beautiful words a little girl could hear”,\(^ {103}\) mark the onset of the protagonist’s character.

Sadler Veach states that “this scholar of literature is oblivious of the painful literary cut of her own tale as she is oblivious of the parallels between the lives of the heroines of French literature on whom she is an authority and her own

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\(^{102}\) A. Brookner, *A Start …* cit., p.8.

\(^{103}\) Ibid. p. 10.
failed life”. I do not agree with Sadler Veach since a close reading of the text seems to reveal Ruth’s awareness of the similarities and parallels between her life and that of the French heroines. This awareness would cause her obsession with Balzac, and her knowing that her life was indeed changed into literature, as she reflects that “her adventure, the one that was to change her life into literature, was not the stuff of gossip. It was, in fact, the stuff of literature itself”.

Nonetheless, it is clear from the start that besides her ‘extreme expectations’, which were never fulfilled, Dr Weiss “had learnt nothing”.

RUTH’S CHILDHOOD

“A pale, neat child, with extraordinary hair that made her head ache” is how Ruth remembers herself, and “so eager […] to join this upward movement towards the light that she hardly noticed that her home resembled the ones she was reading about: a superficial veil of amusement over a deep well of disappointment”.

Except for her paternal grandmother, Ruth’s childhood is devoid of love and affection and solitary from the start. Her grandmother is the reference figure in Ruth’s life and she is also the loving surrogate mother the child needs. Nonetheless Ruth’s past is dark, gloom, bleak and silence reigns everywhere.

Ruth’s life as a child is deeply linked to that of her grandmother, a woman who came from Berlin, haunted by a ‘sad European past’, who takes care of her and

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104 L. Sadler Veach, op. cit., p. 11.
105 A. Brookner, A Start …, op. cit., p. 9.
106 Ibid. p.11.
cooks her meals. They are similar in their solitary, silenced attitudes, and - “the child accepted silence as a natural condition”. Meals constitute the central element of their lives. During her solitary childhood Ruth stays besides her grandmother avoiding to do everything that could cause trouble or noise, the two “got on very well, each as silent as the other”, and she is never seen while she is playing with other children who are the same age as she is, “she disliked other children because they made such an uninhibited noise”, preferring instead to read her books.\textsuperscript{107}

The grandmother presides over the kitchen and the dining room where the table is “always half laid” and what the child experiences at mealtimes is a “doleful atmosphere” which she assumes to be universal imagining heavy furniture, silent grandmothers and dark dining rooms everywhere - “as if sodden with a miasma of gravy and tears”.\textsuperscript{108} Both grandmother and granddaughter are “obsessed with absent families” and during those solitary meals, with the old woman the child - “learns an immense sense of responsibility”.\textsuperscript{109}

The attitudes of Ruth’s parents towards their daughter reveal the importance of the grandmother in her childhood.

Ruth’s parents are insubstantial, self-centred. The grandmother thinks that they are lightweight and she is worried about the consequences for Ruth “the child was too quiet and too thin. Already she blinked nervously. She had no friends.

\textsuperscript{107}Ibid. p. 13.
\textsuperscript{108}Ibid. p. 12.
\textsuperscript{109}Ibid. p. 13.
None of them had friends".\textsuperscript{110} In fact, Ruth’s parents act as if they are constantly on stage, role playing their lives and waiting for audience response.

‘Darling heart’, called her mother, as she outlined her eyes with blue, watching her mouth uttering the words. ‘Yes darling’, called George, admiring the fit of a new jacket, trying a silk scarf at his neck. The reflections in the mirror did not suit them so well these days […]. To the child they were still glamorous and beautiful. To the grandmother they were fools.\textsuperscript{111}

Ruth lives in a divided household and she knows it. Her parents are an uncertain presence “never to be taken for granted”.\textsuperscript{112} When she is at home, Helen, Ruth’s mother, occupies the drawing room but her daughter perceives some sort of danger there: “her quarters seemed less substantial than the grandmother’s. More alluring, but less safe”.\textsuperscript{113} Notwithstanding her own perceptions about her parents, whom she knows are “each separately but passionately concerned with their appearance” and the fact that they both ignore her, “the child loved her parents passionately and knew them to be unsafe”.\textsuperscript{114}

The little girl “marvelled at the stability of her world”, seeing no apparent changes in her life, and is “maintained in childhood by her youthful parents and her ageing grandmother”. Her childhood ends when she experiences the first loss in her life. It happens with the death of her grandmother, and even

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid. p. 15.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid. p. 16.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. p. 17.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. p.13.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid. p. 15.
though the eve she keeps by her grandmother’s bed, during three months before her death seems quiet, and Ruth seems to accept this death without being shocked by it, it is not so, and she will suffer disastrous consequences as a result.

While I was reading *A Start in Life*, at the moment of the death of the grandmother a poem came to my mind. It is *Childhood Is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies*.  

Here are some lines from it.

> Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and at a certain age  
> The child is grown, and puts away childish things.  
> Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.  
> […]  
> Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies that matters, --- mothers and fathers don’t die.

This is what those lines are saying: childhood is a universe still untouched by harm and loss, a safe place where children are allowed to be just what they are, without responsibility. When a child faces death for the first time, and, especially, one that is significant in his life, as it is for Ruth, an abrupt awakening to reality takes place and the child is forced to abandon that kingdom and become suddenly an adult.

Here is how little Ruth confronts with her grandmother’s death, left alone to deal with her sorrow, at her deathbed.

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When Mrs Weiss died, Helen was at the theatre, George was in the
drawing room joking with Nurse Marie, and Ruth was reading. When
Nurse Imelda, coming to draw the curtains, said, ‘I think she’s gone’, she
was rather surprised that Ruth did not lift her eyes from her book. Not until
George burst in, noisily sobbing, did Ruth look up and look away. Then,
said Nurse Imelda later to Nurse Marie, she did a strange thing. She took
her grandmother’s hand and kissed it, then raised the book to her cheek and
held it there for a while, as if for comfort.\footnote{116}

In this touching scene, Ruth, still a little child, does for her grandmother the
thing that she always does to comfort herself. In fact, for Ruth books are a
company and her family, she shares a bit of happiness with her grandmother,
transferring to her, through her book, the same feelings of joy and warmth she
experiences. But before this, probably perceiving some sort of obscure,
definitive farewell with her, she kisses her grandmother’s hand, that same hand
that has touched, cooked for her, and caressed her.

Food and love are intertwined from the start in Ruth’s life. Even when her
grandmother is still alive the child is aware that “the household was supervised
by her grandmother, that without her grandmother there might be no more food”,
and the immediate, practical consequence of Mrs Weiss’ death is the absence of
cooked meals and food.\footnote{117}

This lack of food equates also a lack of love, and the result is Ruth’s perception
of a void that is physical and at the same time emotional. Considering what food
represents, Galef writes: “in all societies, both simple and complex, eating is the

\footnote{116}{Ibid. p.18.}
\footnote{117}{Ibid. p.16.}
primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships”. In Ruth’s family “all members of the household tended to eat separately”, and the grandmother, although she “longed to preside over a roomful of sons and their spouses, […] was forced […] to sit first with George at breakfast, then with the child and the nurse at lunch, and with the child and the nurse at tea, and at their supper”. The apparent truth is that Ruth never shares a meal with her parents, and that her mother has never cooked a single meal for her daughter. Mother and daughter have never shared anything. From birth, Ruth has had a nurse to care for her, and then her grandmother. The mother is strangely absent in her daughter’s life from the start. Ruth’s starvation from the moment of her grandmother’s death shows the implications of her loneliness within her own family. Immediately after the death of her grandmother “she slipped out of the room and was later found in the kitchen, trying to prepare the evening meal”. All that her mother has to say when she comes home later that evening is “why not?” How old can Ruth be at this time? We can imagine that at this point she is no more than twelve, but her sense of responsibility is so strong that she feels bound to cook for everybody, even though at that moment three adults are in the flat with her, but she probably perceives their inadequacy. An inversion of the roles with her parents, especially between mother and daughter takes place and will continue and deprive Ruth of her own adolescence and later of a possibility of love in her life.

119 A. Brookner, A Start … , cit., p. 12.  
120 Ibid. p. 18.  
121 Ibid. p. 18.
Ruth’s quest for love could be perceived as a something intended to fill a gap, a lack, or an enormous void amplifying inside her. Similarly, Malcolm Alexander writes about Ruth’s search for love in terms of rescue, and it is clear that love has the function to substitute a sense of protection and the love she has never had from childhood, though Ruth is not aware of this linkage. Galef writes that “those who do not receive sufficient love in childhood learn to compensate in other ways, and since nurturing is close to nutrition the two often become indissolubly linked on both an emotional and a physical level”, and it is what happens in Ruth’s relationships. From the death of her grandmother Ruth is constantly in search of food, and, consequently, of love, and analogously, as a young woman the pursuit of love and happiness is connected with an offer of food. As Galef stresses:

the connection between food and love is more poignant for women who have traditionally begun by eating but have grown up taught to serve others. This pattern is inevitably repeated in relationships, as Brookner’s characters learn to their dismay. And yet Brookner’s characters, starved as they are from childhood on, are nonetheless trying both to feed others and to fill their own void, the second need neglected by the first.

The relationship with Richard ends so disastrously really because Ruth “has confused his acceptance of food with an offer of love”. Richard is not in love with her. He just went to her flat, especially rented by Ruth to invite him to dinner, to eat a cooked meal. Ruth is not able to see that he is not interested in

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123 Ibid. p. 1.
124 Ibid. p. 2.
her as a lover should, and knowing not what love is, she thinks with pride “I have made him comfortable”, thus ignoring her own needs.125

RUTH AND HER PARENTS
After the death of her grandmother, the fact that her parents leave Ruth alone is more manifest. They are not mourning the loss of the grandmother, while Ruth feels instead an uninterrupted sense of loss and of void symbolized by her continual search for food. Inside the flat where she lives there is a degrading atmosphere of neglect, and the constant smoke of Mrs Cutler’s cigarettes.

Sometimes Ruth would emerge from her room, where she was doing her homework, and penetrate the smoke, interrupting her mother in the middle of an anecdote to ask if there was any supper. She was seduced and alarmed by the sight of three grown-up people behaving as if they were having a midnight feast, her mother in bed in the daytime, her father sitting astride a chair, Mrs Cutler on the edge of the bed, a cigarette in her mouth, a smear of lipstick on her chin. ‘All right, Ruth, you can be heating up some soup. Just for yourself. I’ll have something later’.126

Simply in order not to starve to death, Ruth learns to cook her own food, a “spinsterish fare” of “eggs and boiled potatoes and salads”, and she retires to the kitchen to eat her own prepared food.127 Ruth does so because she thinks that what she prepares is not worthy of her grandmother’s dining room, but maybe another hidden reason are the memories the dining room carries. Eating alone in

125 A. Brookner, A Start …, cit., p. 56.
127 Ibid. p. 20.
the dining room without her grandmother makes solitude even more manifest and the sense of void unbearable, whereas the kitchen represents a neutral zone. School remains a safe place, and a sort of home away from home. “Ruth, except for school, was never sure where the next meal was coming from” and the food she can eat at school can “be relied upon to supply comfort in the form of baked beans and sausages, stewed prunes and custard”. She is always sad when her day at school ends and unwilling to go back home and it is for this reason that the food the school can offer, and the school itself, become her surrogate family and the best of the affection she can have as an adolescent.

After the arrival of Mrs Cutler, Ruth’s parents’ life is spent in their bedroom, especially that of her mother, and they all start eating food in there on trays. The stale air of their bedroom and the depressing sight of their boredom make Ruth feel uneasy about her future life as a young adult “she was in no hurry to enter the adult world, knowing in advance, and she was not wrong, that she was badly equipped for being there”. Ruth’s parents did not set a good example for their daughter, for, still as a child, she could perceive with a presentiment that they were “unsafe against disappointment”, and it was “the strongest conviction she had”. Also grandmother was aware of this, and she knew that her son and his wife “each needed the protection of the other, that neither had grown up or would be able to grow old”, and as a result the persistent image of adulthood

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128 Ibid. p. 22.
129 Ibid. p. 22.
130 Ibid. p. 16.
they convey to their daughter is that of “smoky bedroom, untidiness, watchfulness, and over-insistent and over-demonstrated affection”.  

RUTH AND HER MOTHER

Ruth and her mother could not be more different, and the only resemblance between them lies in their red hair. They live in the same flat as if they were living on two different planets. While the child’s life is dark and gloom besides her grandmother, Helen’s life flows in the “light and bright and frivolous” drawing room, a room that looks “exactly like the set for one of [her] more successful comedy roles”. The two not only lead two different kinds of lives, with different attitudes towards life, but they also live separate lives. The mother is “delighted to have [...] her daughter’s timetable supervised” by her mother-in-law, thus needing not to care for her, and her negative attitude does not change after the death of Mrs Weiss. She simply leaves her daughter to care for herself, ignoring her needs, whereas it is Ruth who has the function to take care of her mother and father; in this inversion of roles between them “she had absorbed, at an early age, the occasional lost look in her parents’ glances and was able to summon up a sturdiness she did not know she possessed in order to reassure them.”

In the meantime, Ruth is maintained in childhood, at fourteen “she remained thin and childlike, a fact which suited Helen well enough”, and she also dresses like a child owing to the fact that her mother has not the time to buy her clothes

131 Ibid. p. 22.
132 Ibid. p. 13.
133 Ibid. p. 32.
(although she is in bed doing nothing all the time), and she cannot allow her
daughter to buy them herself. At fifteen and then at sixteen “she still dressed like
a child”.\textsuperscript{134}

By the time she is at college, Ruth is free to buy the clothes she chooses with the
money her grandmother has left her. Her mother thinks that her pleated skirts
and cardigans are dreary and she sighs that it is “strange that you should have
turned out so different from me”.\textsuperscript{135} But the fact is that Ruth is like her
grandmother, as her father discovers one day while his daughter is serving him a
cup of coffee in her flat with care, as Mrs Weiss would have done: “she takes
after Mamma, George thought with surprise; it had never struck him
before”.\textsuperscript{136} Others are instead well aware of the unlikeness between mother and
daughter, as is Molly, an old friend of Helen’s, when she considers that “little
Ruth had always been so sensible. […] The child always had nice things to say
when they talked on the telephone. None of her mother’s spirit, of course. More
like her grandmother, a very conventional woman”.\textsuperscript{137}

It has been suggested by Sadler Veatch that mother and daughter not only differ
from one another, but that the mother is quite the exact opposite of her daughter.
In fact, the mother’s name, Helen, “suggests a literary counterpart as Ruth’s
suggests a biblical one”.\textsuperscript{138} They are symbolized by Helen of Troy, whose
beauty was the cause of a war, and Rut, the meek, trusting and faithful servant of
her mother-in-law from the Bible. The contrast thus provided throughout the

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid. pp. 22-23.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid. p. 29.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid. p. 41.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid. p. 156.
\textsuperscript{138} L. Sadler Veatch, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 15.
novel by sacred and profane, underlined by their names, stresses even more the existing distance between mother and daughter, and as a result, what emerges is a missing mother, while the daughter is continually in search for her mother’s love.

Ruth admits that she loves both her parents passionately, and though her father tries sometimes to be kind towards her, he feels sorry for the solitary life his daughter leads - “George felt a little sorry for her, sitting there in the evenings, watching television on her own”, and maybe a little guilty too, but nonetheless he absolves himself quickly as his task - “his main job in life was to keep Helen happy”.  

It is clear, instead, that the mother does not like her daughter, that she does not love her and that she thinks that she owes nothing to her. Both parents seem instead well aware that it is their daughter who owes something to them.

Whenever Ruth speaks about leaving home and going away, both parents react with dismay, and especially, her mother over-reacts, as if facing a betrayal. When she is about to leave for Paris her father tells her that she has a duty towards them, he insists that she has in fact the duty to care for her mother, and implicitly, by doing so, the duty to leave himself free from the burden of his wife’s responsibility “think about it, Ruth. You have a duty to her, you know”. Ruth had never been aware before that she had a duty, but though “this was the first Ruth had heard of her duty, which she had always imagined was confined to the characters of Balzac”, it would not be the last.

139 A. Brookner, A Start …, cit., p. 22.
140 Ibid. p. 87.
141 Ibid. p. 87.
The ease with which the mother disposes of her daughter’s life, and despite the fact that she is in Paris away from home is astonishing.

When Mrs Cutler decides to marry again she has to leave Oakwood Court. The servant’s role in the house is thus vacant and Helen tells her husband “well, we had better get Ruth home, I suppose”, as if her daughter were no more than a second choice servant.\textsuperscript{142} In the meantime Ruth is in Paris, about to begin a new life, and she is suddenly called home to duty. The fact is that after having discovered her husband while he was talking on the phone with another woman, Helen has an argument with him and then a heart attack.

Ruth rushes home, presenting a disaster after the strange dream she has had during the night in the train, and when she is finally there, on the edge of her mother’s bedroom she feels guilty and frightened:

She knew that something monstrous waited for her on the other side. The fact of her father’s absence seemed conclusive and it did not occur to her to telephone him: she felt too frightened. He had not wanted to see her, which proved that she too was at fault. She should never have gone away. And now she would see her mother, dying, in her bed.\textsuperscript{143}

When she opens the bedroom door Ruth finds that her mother is not dying but strangely calm and resolute in going away after the quarrel she has had with her husband. Her death occurs on a taxi and it deeply affects Ruth, shocking her.

On their way back home at Victoria station, queuing for a taxi under the rain, Ruth tries to shield her mother, who is shivering from the cold weather “Ruth

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid. p. 125.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid. p. 146.
put the carrier bag down and took her mother in her arms, fearing for her in this damp and cold and acrimonious place. Helen rested lightly against her daughter, her head almost empty of thought”. 144

When their taxi arrives, after three quarters of an hour, and the various bags and Helen are placed inside it, the taxi driver says that he cannot drive them to Oakwood Court:

Helen gave a moan and raised her fingers to her mouth. Ruth looked at her and panicked.

‘I think my mother is ill’, she said kneeling on the floor with her mouth to the taxi driver’s window, as if in a confessional. ‘Please, do be kind and take us home. We have no other way of getting there and I can’t put her back in the queue’.

He looked round. ‘No thanks’, he said swiftly, for he did not like sick passengers and had enough troubles of his own. ‘Can’t be done’, he added. Ruth had one pound in her purse. ‘I will give you double the money’, she urged, although she had no hope of even paying the full fare. The magazine slid off Helen’s lap and Helen made no effort to retain it. Ruth looked around at her mother. Helen’s eyes closed, her hand spread on her chest.

Ruth screamed. ‘Take me home. Take me home. Take me home’. Tears spurted from her eyes and her mouth opened like a child’s. ‘Take me home’, she chanted. ‘Take me home’.

People looked curiously in at the windows of the cab. A policeman approached from the back of the queue. Cursing, the driver fumbled with the gears and the cab moved off. Ruth continued to sob and for a long time stayed kneeling on the floor, with her head against the glass. She did not dare look back. She knew what she would find.

By the time they reached Oakwood Court, Helen had died. 145

144 Ibid. p. 162.
145 Ibid. pp. 163-164.
Ruth’s immediate reaction when she sees that her mother is taken ill is panic: “Ruth looked at her and panicked”. It is the same reaction she had when she was a child and coming home from school her grandmother did not answer to her call. At that time she “panicked when she entered the kitchen, and ran out to get a neighbour”. During the three months of her grandmother’s illness Ruth sat by her bed reading and watching her dying, and later she discovered that she feared physical illness “she became aware […] that she had an extreme horror of physical illness, a loathing for which she tried to compensate by urging the other to be stronger, or calmer, or, as a last resort, more self-indulgent”. When she comes home from Paris she is aware of ‘something monstrous’ waiting for her, as she imagines her mother dying in bed in the same way she saw her grandmother. With the death of her grandmother loneliness and fear came into her life, and now Ruth is afraid that also her mother might die and leave her alone.

Helen is really ill and weak, and at Molly’s house Ruth has to undress her while she “held out her arms, like a child”. Frightened by the sight of her mother’s body Ruth tries to avoid looking at it “with horror Ruth took off her mother’s clothes, which were barely warm and smelled of old scent. She tried not to look at the shrunken breasts, the bony elbows and knees, the slumped and shameful pelvis”.  

146 Ibid. p. 17.  
147 Ibid. p. 31.  
148 Ibid. p. 159.  
149 Ibid. p. 159.
The strange dream Ruth has about her mother on the train is somehow a premonitory dream. She dreams that she is in the dining car of a train that could be the Orient Express, though she does not say it, ordering “contrefilet à la salse ravigote”, and then, “looking sideways through the window, saw her mother, complete with denim cap, waiting patiently in some sort of siding. Helen looked thin, sardonic and helpless”.

In her dream Ruth is trying to open the window to tell her mother something very important “she wanted to explain to her the impossibility of her leaving the train until it stopped at a proper station. But the window would not budge and Helen continued to stare, amused but implacable, through to the place where Ruth was sitting”. The significance of the dream is clear. The luxurious international train where Ruth is ordering a sophisticated French meal symbolizes the beauty of the new life she was beginning to enjoy in Paris. The scene of her meal in the train is abruptly interrupted, and then becomes of no importance, by the sudden sight of her helpless mother waiting in a siding. It reveals Ruth’s initial half-reluctance to abandon the life she was only beginning to perceive she could have had in Paris, until the impossibility to reach her mother causes a change in her and she is only anxious to leave the train and join her mother. Food again equates love and life, but this time in her Ruth gives up to have her meal and then forgets about it, as in her real life, going back to her mother, she gives up the possibility of a new life, and consequently of love, and tries to forget about it for the rest of her life.

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150 Ibid. p. 144.
151 Ibid. p. 144.
Begging the taxi driver to take her and her mother home, Ruth desperately kneels on the floor “as if in a confessional”. She is praying, but not only the taxi driver, she is praying because she feels guilty of having gone away, she is praying that she can go back home again, praying that her mother would not die and leave her alone. She screams “take me home” with tears in her eyes and her mouth open “like a child’s”. Ruth has left home and her mother, and now that she is dead she cannot go back to her any longer. Even though Ruth is grown up, emotionally, her loss is like that of a child when he loses the mother. She feels abandoned, totally alone in the world and terribly scared.

During their journey, and then at Molly’s, Ruth is thinking about her mother’s attitude towards her “Ruth was a little hurt that her mother should ignore her to such an extent but she was too relieved to find Helen alive – and in a strange way in command – to experience real cause for complaint”.\textsuperscript{152} That cause is the sense of isolation and distance from her mother, the fact that she is not, and never has been, included in her mother’s life. The narrator of the story provides an explanation for Helen’s attitude asserting that “she had never been a maternal woman, had never felt that hunger that makes a woman reach to caress and stroke a child’s flesh and which is never assuaged”.\textsuperscript{153} Helen was basically a lightweight, as her mother-in-law thought about her, “too beautiful, too happy, too successful, ever to feel premonitory loss”, a woman living a sheltered life.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid. p. 157.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid. p. 162.
who had “never really got used to doing things for herself, only became vibrant and independent when on stage”, but who was “childishly inept in the house”.  

There seems thus to be no real cause for her ignoring her daughter, a fact due instead to the simple consequence of the natural disposition of her own character.

This, however, may also be only part of the truth. Helen has maintained her daughter in a childlike state “a fact which suited [her] well enough”, as long as she could.  

When Ruth wanted to invite Richard to dinner, she had once asked her mother’s advice on how to behave and she reacted as “vaguely offended”. And, finally, when she was not working, and had been offered a couple of parts “as the heroine’s mother […] these she had spurned with hauteur”.  

The suspicion is that the only role Helen is not apt to play, and that she does not want to play is that of the mother, on stage as in real life. She does not intend to be anybody’s mother, not even Ruth’s.

And, another relevant part of the truth is, in fact, that Ruth is an unwanted child from before the beginning of her own life.

Thinking about his wife, and the time he first met her, Ruth’s father is thinking back over the past, revealing things to the reader that Ruth would never be able to know:

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155 Ibid. p. 22.
156 Ibid. p. 49.
157 Ibid. p. 34.
He thought of Helen as he had first known her, how he had waited for her shamelessly at the stage door. He thought of their courtship and their many honeymoons, for they liked to think of themselves as perpetual lovers. He remembered how they had groaned when they had discovered that Helen was pregnant, and of all the fuss she had made, wanting to get rid of the baby. He remembered his mother’s stern face when she overheard some of this exchange. She had entered Helen’s bedroom, minatory in her black dress with the small dots and the dull cut steel brooch at the collar, and had extracted from her a promise that she would behave herself like a responsible married woman. They had been ashamed as a couple of children, and Helen had had her baby. A funny little thing, with Helen’s red hair, but none of her looks. Mrs Weiss eventually took over the functions of a nurse.158

Ruth is forced to understand her parents’ temperament, their rapid shift of moods and trying to find a place for her within the perpetual, prolonged honeymoon they were having. Still a child, though she felt uneasy between her parents, and - “apologetic about her presence which somehow marred the hectic honeymoon atmosphere which they sought to prolong”.159 Using George’s own words, her parents could be described as partners in crime, a crime perpetrated towards their own daughter, not only because the mother did not want her, wanting to get rid of the burden, or because they are behaving like children, obliging the child to assume the role of caregiver, but because they are keeping this secret towards Ruth, who will never thus be able to understand the origin of her troubled life. So, Ruth is fated from birth to be both a daughter and an outsider within her own family, and her sad story leads to no revelations for her.

159 Ibid. p. 16.
At forty, Dr Weiss, while working on Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet*, is elaborating her own - “theories about Eugénie’s relations with her parents, whom she still blamed for the defection of Eugénie’s lover” thus, implicitly, blaming her own parents too.\(^{160}\)

There are many similarities between the stories of Eugénie and Ruth. Throughout the novel Eugénie’s story parallels that of Ruth through Ruth’s reading of it which provides what Skinner describes “a kind of metacommentary on her own progress”.\(^{161}\)

Skinner writes that, “no other Brookner fiction has such an intimate relation with another text”, and argues that, “neither of [the other early novels contain] such a wide range of thematic and structural parallels as those between *A Start in Life* and *Eugénie Grandet*”.\(^{162}\)

Skinner analyzes the structural parallels between *A Start in Life* and *Eugénie Grandet*, identifying - “the gloom and heaviness of the Weiss apartment in Oakwood Court – minutely described in the opening chapters – [as to] reproduce something of the oppressive quality of Grandet’s house in Saumur”, illustrating each home as - “the sole environment for the long and lonely adolescence of an only child”.\(^{163}\) There are also close parallels between the description of Eugénie’s cousin Charles and Richard Hirst, both perceived as demi-gods, as in this case Ruth compares her loved one with Racine’s Hyppolyte. Both heroines are

\(^{160}\) Ibid. p. 9.
\(^{161}\) J. Skinner, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
\(^{162}\) Ibid. p. 34.
\(^{163}\) Ibid. p. 33.
underfed; they both prepare a meal for their lovers, and they lend them a sum of money that will be later returned with a letter announcing their lover’s weddings to another woman.

The “most striking revision”, according to Skinner, centres on Eugénie’s physical appearance. Unlike Eugénie, Ruth is thin and frail. This “reversal of physical types” establishes “a new moral polarity, so that if in Eugénie Grandet ‘plump’ is desirable, in A Start in Life ‘slim’ is good”.¹⁶⁴  

As suggested by Skinner, “Eugénie Grandet’s helpless cry ‘Je ne suis pas assez belle pour lui’ explicitly anticipates the story of Ruth’s own life, now reproduced in a lengthy retrospective”, implying that the strongest resemblance between Eugénie and Ruth lies in the similarities of their hopeless love stories.¹⁶⁵  

Malcolm Alexander discusses instead - “the interspersing of French phrases”, in A Start in Life. She stresses the significance of the truths conveyed by Eugénie’s phrases “Je ne suis pas assez belle pour lui”,¹⁶⁶ and “aussi, se dit-elle en se mirant, sans savoir encore ce qu’était l’amour: Je suis trole laide; il ne fera pas attention à moi”.¹⁶⁷ Malcolm observes that “the French stands out from the rest of the English text just as its message stands in opposition to everything that Ruth had been taught from childhood”, commenting on the fact that “the absence of a translation […] lends an air of secrecy to words that Ruth later regards as a revelation”.¹⁶⁸

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¹⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 32.  
¹⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 29.  
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¹⁶⁷  
¹⁶⁸ C. Malcolm Alexander, op. cit., p. 27.
Yet, while focusing on the similarities and the differences between Eugénie and Ruth, critics seem not to notice a major difference between *Eugénie Grandet* and *A Start in Life*. This difference is in the figure of the mother and in the relationship between mother and daughter. Unlike Helen, Eugénie’s mother loves her daughter tenderly. Throughout the novel there are marks of affection from the mother towards her daughter, as when Eugénie, is caught in despair knowing that her beloved cousin Charles has to leave for the Indies:

> cette emotion nerveuse chez une nature jusqu’alors en apparence calme et froide réagit sur madame Grandet, qui regarde sa fille avec cette intuition sympatique dont sont douées les mères pour l’objet de leur tendresse, et devina tout. Mais, à la vérité, la vie des célèbres sœurs hongroises, attachées l’une à l’autre par une erreur de la nature, n’avait pas été plus intime que ne l’était celle d’Eugénie et de sa mère, toujours ensemble dans cette embrasure de croisée, ensemble à l’église, et dormant ensemble dans le même air.\(^{169}\)

Madame Grandet divines her daughter’s love for her cousin, and, despite her husband, she helps Eugénie to prepare a clandestine breakfast for him. She possesses that special kind of intuition that only mothers possess towards their child. Mother and daughter love one another so intensely, so truly, that their relationship could be defined as a symbiotic one.

Physical, tangible signs of affection also characterize their symbiotic relationship, as when the mother comforts her daughter taking her in her arms “ma pauvre enfant! dit madame Grandet en prenant la tête d’Eugénie pour

l’appuyer contre son sein”, and in return Eugénie kisses her mother’s hand “oppressée de reconnaissance pour l’admirable entente de coeur que lui avait témoignée sa mère, Eugénie lui baisa la main en disant: - Combien tu est bonne, ma chère maman!”, just the same thing Ruth as a child did for her grandmother when she died.  

The death of Eugénie’s mother resonates the deaths both of Ruth’s grandmother and mother. Like Ruth’s grandmother, madame Grandet dies in her bed after a long illness, but, during this period of time, Eugénie being a young woman is able to look after her mother, and she nurses and cures her in a way that Ruth, as a child, could not do “malgré les soins les plus tendres prodigués par Eugénie, madame Grandet marcha rapidement vers la mort. Chaque jour, elle s’affaiblissait et dépérissait”. Another difference is that madame Grandet is very weak but lucid, unlike Ruth’s grandmother. Thus, between Eugénie and her mother there is a continual interchange of affection, whereas from Ruth’s grandmother comes only silence. Ruth had tried to talk to her grandmother while she was lying in her bed, but Nurse Imelda said “she can’t hear you”, that is why she took a book with her to her grandmother’s bedroom, to comfort herself. The difference between the death of Ruth’s mother and Eugénie’s mother lies in the mother’s attitude towards the daughter. While she is dying, madame Grandet’s words and thoughts are all for her daughter. She is worried for her, aware that she is leaving her alone in the world, fearing that her daughter will never know what happiness is:

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170 Ibid. p. 83.
171 Ibid. p. 206.
172 A. Brookner, A Start …, cit., p. 18.
Ce fut une mort digne de sa vie [...]. Eclatèrent particulièrement ses vertus, sa patience d’ange et son amour pour sa fille; elle s’éteignit sans avoir laissé échapper la moindre plainte. Agneau sans tache, elle allait au ciel, et ne regretta ici-bas que la douce compagne de sa froide vie, à laquelle ses derniers regards semblaient prédire mille maux. Elle tremblait de laisser cette brebis, blanche comme elle, seule au milieu d’un monde égoïste qui voulait lui arracher sa toison, ses trésors.173

Instead, while Ruth and her mother are queuing for the taxi, shortly before her death, Helen drifts:

remembering her younger days and triumphs, when there were always people there to take care of things. ‘Your sheltered life’. George used to say to her jokingly, when she demanded to have a dress chosen or asked him to brush her hair. […] When taking a curtain call she looked and felt indomitable. […] She had never learned to cook and of course would not shop and clean. When she reflected on this, and on the way George had judged her and found her wanting, the pain in her heart, which was now beating like a drum, became sharper. It had all got out of control, like her retirement, which had been involuntary, and her loss of weight and vigour, both of which she now experienced as extreme weakness. A brief spurt of anger (‘Why me? I always gave good value’) dissolved into a weariness which she could no longer measure.174

Helen’s thoughts are entirely devoted to her successful past, to her husband, and to the fact that despite her ineptitude he has chosen her. The sudden, involuntary

174 A. Brookner, A Start …, cit., p. 163.
retirement resulting in her premature aging causes “a brief spurt of anger”, bearing evidence of Helen’s fierceness and haughtiness until the end.

There is no trace of a single thought of any kind for her daughter; Ruth is really absent from her mother’s mind even though they are together, and her daughter is thus hurt “that her mother should ignore her to such an extent”.\textsuperscript{175} And Helen’s retirement had not been all that “involuntary”.

The truth is that as she aged she grew unfit the role of the heroine on stage anymore. Thus, when she was offered “a couple of parts as the heroine’s mother”, she spurned them “with hauteur”. Instead of an implied refusal of motherhood, while interpreting the heroine’s mother on stage, this fact may reveal Helen’s fear of growing old, a truth she tried to conceal to herself.

Helen is not the only one concealing truths, shielding herself from reality. Also Ruth does this throughout her life.

“Accounts must always be rendered, if only to oneself”, says Ruth to herself.\textsuperscript{176} \textit{A Start in Life} is the ideal account Ruth gives herself of her own experiences and life, though what is narrated is not the whole truth. Among the things Ruth tells, many facts are omitted, avoided, evaded. She is extremely reticent, cautious, and afraid of letting certain things emerge.

If we return to the beginning of the novel we will be able to give access to the understanding of the reason why Dr Weiss perceives literature as the cause of

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid. p. 157.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid. p. 54.
her failed life, as stated in the opening words of the novel “Dr Weiss, at forty, knew that her life had been ruined by literature”:

She was working on Eugénie Grandet and Balzac’s unnervingly accurate assessment of Eugénie’s innocent and hopeless love was making her uncomfortable, as it always did. ‘Je ne suis pas assez belle pour lui’. Why had her nurse not read her a translation of Eugénie Grandet? The whole of life might have been different. For moral fortitude, as Dr Weiss knew, but never told her students, was quite irrelevant in the conduct of one’s life; it was better, or in any event, easier, to be engaging. And attractive. Sometimes Dr Weiss perceived that her obsession with Balzac stemmed from the fact that he had revealed this knowledge to her, too late. She grieved over Eugénie, and this was the only permissible grief she allowed herself. Beyond the imposed limits it hovered, threatening, insinuating, subversive. 177

Dr Weiss is convinced that the reading of a book like Eugénie Grandet instead of Cinderella’s story could have spared her from suffering. The story of “Eugénie’s innocent and hopeless love” and her lack of beauty make her uncomfortable echoing her own past experiences, but nonetheless Dr Weiss insists on studying Balzac, on whom she is writing a multivolume, insisting on what finally results as an ‘obsession’. Dr Weiss is well aware of the lessons Balzac teaches “[the] strange sense of the unfinished, the sudden unforeseen deaths, the endless and unexpected remorse, the mutation of one grand lady into someone else’s grander wife, the ruthless pursuit of the ambition”, and her

own failed life provide an example for each one of these statements. Dr Weiss grieves over Eugénie, and given the similarities between her own story and that of Balzac’s heroine it could be supposed that Dr Weiss is also grieving over herself through a third party. This one grief Dr Weiss allows herself is “the only permissible grief” she can bear.

As a matter of fact, the heroine of *A Start in Life* is, divided into two parts. Dr Weiss provides the frame for the story, and Ruth is the protagonist of that same story, each completely sealed off from the other.

When Ruth’s ideal of a life as beautiful as a fairy-tale abruptly collapses into Eugénie Grandet’s reality, Dr Weiss steps in, and, paradoxically, though hiding herself in the fictional world of literature she shields Ruth from reality and grief.

That only grief Dr Weiss accepts tries to overtake the self-imposed limits hovering, threatening and insinuating her. The grief, that is Ruth’s grief, wants to be acknowledged and it continues in its attempts at surfacing Dr Weiss’s conscience.

Dr Weiss identifies that grief with the lack of passion and of a lover in her life. While Dr Weiss is blaming literature, and condemning her own parents too, in the same way that she blames Eugénie’s parents “for the defection of Eugénie’s lover”, she thinks that she is wrong, according to the truth stated by Balzac:

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178 Ibid. p. 140.
had not Balzac given the right explanation? ‘Aussi, se dit-elle en se
mirant, sans savoir encore ce qu’était l’amour: je suis strop laide, il ne
fera pas attention à moi’.”

Dr Weiss is thus finally blaming literature, her looks, and possibly her own
personality as the cause of the lack of love in her life.

At the end of her story Ruth ends bereft, paralyzed, and scared. This happens
even before the death of her husband, Roddy, while she is still married and
there are not apparent reasons for her to feel so. Something threatening and
insinuating lies dormant inside her and makes her “clung to [her husband] in
the night when she wakened so inexplicably in terror, with fragments of dream
evaporating into the greater unreality of her present life”. This seems to
suggest a prior cause of grief both Ruth, and later Dr Weiss, are unable to
identify. The only certainty Dr Weiss has is that, despite her extreme, never
fulfilled expectations, she “had learnt nothing”, and sometimes “when life was
particularly uncomfortable”, wishing that “time might be reversed and that she
might fall asleep once more to the sound of the most beautiful words a little
girl could hear: “Cinderella shall go to the ball”, she regresses to her childhood,
at the time when she could still understand the world before the fall. A fall she
was sure there had been in her life.

Yet she was aware of something out of joint. She would have preferred
the books to have been right. The patient striving for virtue, the long term

179 Ibid. p. 9.
180 Ibid. p. 173.
181 Ibid. p. 8.
of trial, the ecstasy of earned reward: these things would never now be hers. She had deviated from the only path she knew and she had lost her understanding of the world before the fall. That there had been a fall, she was quite sure.\textsuperscript{182}
3. PROVIDENCE

*Providence* is the story of Kitty Maule, a young academic aged thirty, “difficult to place”, and whose research subject is the Romantic Tradition.\(^{183}\) She lives in London and is an orphan. Her English father died before she was born, her mother died instead “quickly and quietly one evening at the dinner table” when Kitty was about twenty-seven years old.\(^{184}\)

Her mother, Marie-Thérèse, was the only daughter of Vadim and Louise, Kitty’s grandparents, whom she calls Papa and Maman Louise. Vadim is a Russian who immigrated to France with his family, and he was formerly part of an acrobatic act, performing once at the Olympia in Paris. Louise is a French seamstress who had “ambitions for the future”.\(^{185}\) They met in Paris, and after their marriage they went to London, settling first in Percy Street. They had their daughter and then, triumphantly, they installed in a salon in Grosvenor Street.

Aware of her “colourful”, alien, family history, Kitty is reticent to talk about her family:

> when asked about her background she usually simplified, for her family history was perhaps a little colourful. She found it too tiring to recount, for so much additional explanation was needed, footnotes on alien professions, habits, customs that most people could not be expected to

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\(^{184}\) Ibid. p. 15.

\(^{185}\) Ibid. p. 8.
understand and which were to her as native as the colour of her own hair.\textsuperscript{186}

Even though Kitty feels English, she also feels an outsider in the English society, the place where she would like to be included, and this explains why, from the start of the novel, when she is asked about her origins she talks about her English father only, whose figure is given emphasis though she has never even known him:

she usually said, ‘My father was in the army. He died before I was born’. This was the exact truth, but it was not all the truth, for the father to whom she delegated the prominent role in her family history had never even registered in her consciousness as absent. Quite simply, he had never been there.\textsuperscript{187}

A pattern establishes itself quite immediately. Kitty lives her life telling the truth about herself, although that truth is only partial, or half of the truth. This pattern includes omissions, and in fact, what is omitted is frequently what matters most to understand Kitty’s moves and actions. Kitty cannot even register her father in her consciousness as absent, whereas “her mother was there, and her grandmother and grandfather”, but as her mother is dead too, what Kitty is omitting in her thoughts is the fact of her mother’s absence in her life after her death.\textsuperscript{188}

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid. p. 5.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid. p. 5.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid. p. 5.
Like *A Start in Life*, *Providence* is characterized by food symbolism throughout the novel; there is a literary counterpart to Kitty’s story provided by B. Constant’s *Adolphe*, “a short novel about failure”, and the elusive presence of an idealized young man, Maurice Bishop.

*Adolphe* is the novel Kitty is lecturing on during her seminar. Ellénore, the female heroine of the novel, dies in despair after having been rejected by her lover, Adolphe. Kitty is aware of the “terribly, enfeebling message” the novel conveys “that a man gets tired if [the woman he loves] sacrifices everything for him, that such a woman will eventually die of her failure, and that the man will be poisoned by remorse for the rest of his life”.¹⁸⁹ In fact, as Manini Nayar notes, *Adolphe* provides a sub-text “ironically commenting on Kitty’s romantic interlude destined for failure”.¹⁹⁰

Maurice Bishop is the ‘divine’ English male and an insider too. He seems divine to Kitty because of his faith; he is a devout Christian, believing in Providence.

When they talk about Providence he says to Kitty “I can’t tell you how simple life is when you know that you are being looked after. How you can survive one blow after another. [...] I believe in Providence”.¹⁹¹ Kitty is eager to be included in a simple, safe, English life and family, like the one Maurice has, so to be able to be looked after too in her turn.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 44.
But the truth is that like Richard Hirst in *A Start in Life*, Maurice Bishop is self-interested, far from the idealized image Kitty has built of him.

In fact, while he is secretly in love with another woman, Maurice accepts and appreciates the food Kitty prepares for him, but, by doing so, he is not accepting Kitty’s love, as she instead thinks. Simply, as Manini remarks, “Maurice, like Richard in *A Start in Life*, makes the best of this to his advantage, accepting free dinners as a favour bestowed rather than received”.

Maurice does not love Kitty and he will finally deceive her, but Kitty is not really in love with Maurice either, though she thinks that she needs him in order to become an insider into the English society through him.

I want more, she thought […]. I do not want to be trustworthy, and safe, and discreet. I do not want to be the one who understands and sympathizes and soothes. […] I do not want to be good at pleasing everybody. […] I want to be totally unreasonable, totally unfair, very demanding, and very beautiful. I want to be part of a real family. […] I do not want to spend my life in this rotten little flat. I want wedding presents. I want to be half of a recognized couple. I want a future away from this place. I want Maurice.

What Kitty really wants is to be included, to be part of a whole, and Malcolm points out that far from showing passion, these are “the sentiments of a

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pragmatist who sees that the only escape from a marginalized existence is to marry an insider”.

Kitty has already a family though she rejects it, it is “a bizarre and anomalous family. To Kitty, who loved England as only one who is not wholly English can do, Louise and Vadim and Marie-Thérèse were almost an embarrassment”.

Returning home from boarding school - her fellow-boarders have solid English families unlike her own - “she found she needed several days to change over from being Kitty to being Thérèse”.

Kitty is in fact doubled; she has two names and two identities. Kitty’s full French name is Catherine Joséphine Thérèse, but at home for her mother and grandparents she is Thérèse, whereas “away from them, she was Kitty. And most of the time she felt like Kitty. Not all the time, but most of it”.

Kitty has thus two names, two identities, two languages, and also two homes. Since Louise’s retirement the grandparents live in the upper part of their daughter’s house in Dulwich, but Kitty, encouraged by her mother and grandmother, has also a flat of her own in Chelsea, where there is the photograph of her father and Kitty feels to be English.

At home, with her family, they speak French, they eat together, and when she goes back there at the weekends Kitty encounters:

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195 A. Brookner, Providence, cit., p. 12.
196 Ibid. p. 13.
197 Ibid. p. 7.
the smells, the furnishings, the continual discussion that might take place in an apartment house in Paris or perhaps further east. An air of dimness, of stuffy comfort, an emanation of ceremonious meals, long past, an airlessness, hours spent on the routine matters of raising and eating and drinking coffee; an insistence of food, the centrality of food.\textsuperscript{198}

If in \textit{A Start in Life} Ruth was underfed, here it is Kitty who refuses her grandfather’s food:

gradually Kitty came to dread the weekends which were symbolized for her by the food thrust lovingly in front of her. She began to refuse it and her heart ached as Vadim, dejected, bore it away again.\textsuperscript{199}

Beyond Kitty’s refusal of food there is another implied refusal, if not of her grandfather, whom she loves, of his alterity. In fact, rejecting her grandfather’s food she also rejects her own French roots.

Both grandparents are aware of their granddaughter’s difference from them. Vadim realizes the fact that “his granddaughter had been affected by an alien and sentimental culture”,\textsuperscript{200} and both her grandparents and her mother see her alterity - “to the family […] was like a marvellous foreigner”.\textsuperscript{201} Nonetheless, when she is back to her flat in Chelsea she feels lonely. Her flat “seemed to her quite empty of everything, of smell, taste, atmosphere, sound, food. She would

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{198}{Ibid. p. 6.}
\footnotetext{199}{Ibid. p. 16.}
\footnotetext{200}{Ibid. p. 16.}
\footnotetext{201}{Ibid. p. 14.}
\end{footnotes}
look out of the window for signs of life, not realizing that she never did this in her other home, in the suburbs, where her grandparents lived”.

So, Kitty is caught between two cultures, and two lives, and she keeps trying to balance them not always sure of her identity, and unable to find a place she can call her own. Thinking back her past family life, Kitty understands that “the strangeness began” after her father’s death when she and her mother had been taken back into her grandparents’ care, “for they were not like other people, and destined to designate the island of remoteness in Kitty’s character which gave her so much trouble”.

Kitty and Her Mother

Cheryl Alexander Malcolm argues that, “Providence is essentially the story of an outsider who remains an outsider”, yet Kitty’s sense of displacement for being an outsider is reinforced by the death of her mother.

As a consequence of their daughter’s death Kitty’s grandparents seem diminished, they “became older and seemed to revert to their less illustrious days in Paris, before success had brought them their modest affluence”. The atmosphere inside their house is one of “great sadness”, though never of despair.

When for the first time in the novel Kitty thinks about her mother’s death she seems not deeply affected by her loss, nor by her absence.

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202 Ibid. p. 6.
203 Ibid. p. 7.
205 A. Brookner, Providence, cit., p. 15.
In contrast to this, though she pretends with herself that it is not so, the text evidences that the death of Kitty’s mother was a terrible shock to her, affecting her in various way.

The first immediate consequence of this is reflected on Kitty’s attitude towards food. In fact, her mother died while she was eating, with the whole family gathered around the dinner table:

it had been a strange and peaceful death, her mother collapsed in her chair, one small hand trailing through some fragments of walnut shell. The faintly sour scent of her grandmother’s discarded fruit peel was still in Kitty’s nostrils, as well as the sight of her grandfather, with tears pouring down his face, crying, ‘Marie-Thérèse! Marie-Thérèse!’

Somehow the event had been incorporated into their family life, but Kitty Maule could never sit down to a hearty plateful of food without hearing the plaint, ‘Marie-Thérèse! Marie-Thérèse!’ Her throat would close and a faint trembling would start in her hand.206

The direct consequence, thus, is that food and its smells are inextricably connected with the traumatic event of the death of her mother. Every time she has to eat a meal Kitty goes through those same painful moments, her throat closes, her hands tremble, and the cry ‘Marie-Thérèse!’ echoes in her mind. Kitty can never enjoy a single meal, and when she is dining alone, as a consequence of this, “Kitty Maule tended to dispatch the meal as quickly as possible and also to distract herself from the actual business of eating.”207

206 Ibid. p. 18.
207 Ibid. p. 18.
She prefers eating from a tray, while doing something else like reading, or wandering about her flat, doing things that do not make her think about the food.

Food is not a pleasure for Kitty, this is underlined by her difficulty to eat, which also symbolizes an enormous void inside her, a gap she cannot fill, as it was for Ruth.

Notwithstanding her bewilderment during the meals, caused by her mother’s death, Kitty is still pretending that her mother’s absence has no effects on her, while her actions contrast this. For example, whenever she is inside a church she always lights a candle for her, even though at the same time she claims that, “she felt nothing, for she had no sense of Marie-Thérèse’s presence in her life and therefore did not believe that the dead could live eternally”.208 So, given the facts that Kitty cannot believe in God, that she has not faith, and her assumption that she cannot sense her mother’s presence in her life, why is she lighting candles for her, and for her only?

In her effort to win Maurice’s love, Kitty begins her personal search for faith, aware as she is that “the key to Maurice was in his belief in the divine will”.209 She thus consults her mother’s Bible, because “she believed that it contained the answers”, and one day she finds a passage that seems to have a message “purely for her”.210

208 Ibid. p. 22.
209 Ibid. p. 28.
210 Ibid. p. 28.
Il m’a envoyé … pour proclamer à ceux de Sion qui pleurent, que la magnificence leur sera donnée au lieu de la cendre, l’huile de joie au lieu du deuil, un manteau de louange au lieu d’un esprit affligé.  

Thus, although not having faith, Kitty is sure that in the Bible she can find answers to her questions.

The Bible’s message moves Kitty “so strangely” that doubting the French rendition of the passage, she needs to consult it in the Authorized Version, where, significantly, it sounds “more splendid, more resonant, more authoritative, as if God’s native tongue were English”.  

Kitty reads the translation of the passage that says “… beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness …”, but she omits to read in English the first part of the passage she has already read in French, “ Il m’a envoyé … pour proclamer à ceux … qui pleurent”. The words of this sentence convey a secret meaning to Kitty; in fact, those who are mourning are herself and her grandparents, and they are mourning the loss of Marie-Thérèse. A special message is sent to Kitty through the words of the Bible, which is her mother’s French Bible, and it seems to Kitty as if through her Bible her mother had wanted to say those words of encouragement to her. Those words resound inside Kitty so intensely that, for the first time from the death of her mother, she thinks that she can bear her pains and sorrows and

211 Ibid. p. 28.
212 Ibid. p. 28.
213 Ibid. p. 29.
voice them, “she allowed her fears and griefs to come to the surface, in the timid hope that it was now safe to do so”. 214

Academic life shields and protects Kitty as it did for Ruth. Ruth hides in it as Dr Weiss, and similarly Kitty feels that while she is lecturing she is shielding herself from real life, “it’s the only time I ever really forget myself […]. Real life seems to impose such insuperable problems that it is quite restful to think about something entirely different and for which I take no responsibility”. 215

After a hard day of work, at the end of one of her seminar lectures, Kitty feels that those insuperable problems are left behind her, including also the memory of her mother’s death, “she felt that she had left her onerous daily self behind, and with it all problems of nationality, religion, identity, her place in the world, what to cook for dinner, all thoughts of eventual loneliness and illness and death”. 216

Academic life she is a context that “did not take into account her beginnings or her background”, 217 thus, it represents a safe place for her, and that context contains also Maurice.

During one of the staff meetings Kitty continues to look at Maurice with the secret hope that he would look in her direction and meet her eyes, but that never happens.

214 Ibid. p. 29.
215 Ibid. p. 42.
216 Ibid. p. 52.
217 Ibid. p. 37.
Maurice represents the alibi Kitty has created for her own sake, and under the pretext of her love for him she keeps her fears and griefs at bay, but when he fails to look at her, Kitty feels unprotected and vulnerable:

are we so civilized, so controlled, so expert in our concealment that we are never allowed to reveal anything to the world about ourselves and each other? [...] She could feel her contentment ebbing away, felt it suddenly to be nugatory, laughable, a pretence that her rational self could not accept. She dreaded these moments which came without warning, and waited with distress until they should have passed, leaving her once again in possession of her secret. ²¹⁸

The moments Kitty dreads, perceiving them as a threat, make her feel her contentment “a pretence that her rational self could not accept”, in fact her unconscious, even though she conceals it, is surfacing against her will, dismantling the net of certainties Kitty has built around herself for protection against the truth, “her sedulously careful rituals for outwitting the long nights, the exorcism of her various familiars and dreams, were losing their ability to soothe her”. ²¹⁹ Bereavement is the ultimate cause, but afterwards her strategy of concealment prevails again, and “immediately, she suppressed the thought”. ²²⁰ Kitty finds a precarious balance between her rational self and her unconscious mind in “an assumption of effortlessness. Whatever it cost her. The elegance of a behaviour calculated to disarm, never to give offence. No apparent pain”. ²²¹

²¹⁸ Ibid. p. 38.
²¹⁹ Ibid. p. 38.
²²⁰ Ibid. p. 38.
²²¹ Ibid. p. 40.
By doing so Kitty tries to dissimulate the bad moments and the pain she feels, still pretending to be unaware of what causes them:

even if these bad moments came – and she did not know why they should – she would deal with them by means of her new strategy of smiling them out of the way. A strategy of elegance appealed to her, for although it was a way of giving the lie, it was also a way of cherishing the truth.222

Again, Kitty seems unable to see the linkage between the bad moments that befall her and her subterranean, persistent thought of her mother’s death, though she knows that her strategy, while concealing the truth with lies, is also cherishing it, thus cherishing the memory of her mother deep inside her.

One evening Maurice is invited to dinner in Kitty’s flat. Kitty is an excellent cook, and she can bear the sight of food if she has to cook and feed her loved one. Kitty wants to know about Lucy, the girl he was in love with, and reluctantly he tells her the story of their engagement, and how, discovering that she had a vocation, she left him two months before their wedding, she went to Calcutta and joined Mother Teresa.

After this sad story, Kitty takes Maurice in her arms, while the room is darkening, and she feels “her whole heart dissolving in sadness and wonder”,223 whereas Maurice, to Kitty’s surprise recovers quite quickly.

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222 Ibid. p. 41.
223 Ibid. p. 60.
As Maurice tells Kitty, though he and Lucy are separated, he still loves her, “enough to last [him] for the rest of [his] life”, and he knows that they “shall never be closer than [they] are now”.\(^{224}\)

This fact happened three years before, and when she is alone, Kitty thinks about her mother who died at the same time. Both she and Maurice have experienced a loss in their lives, but, although Maurice seems to have recovered, Kitty has not. After the death of her mother Kitty is unable to recover her original feeling of safety, while Maurice reveals her that there exist a safety “beyond anything she had ever known”, that “even the memory of it bestows immunity”.\(^{225}\)
	hree years ago, Marie-Thérèse had died, quickly, quietly, without benefit of clergy, without assurance of eternal comfort, her hands trailing among the walnut shells. They never spoke of her at home, and indeed Kitty herself thought little about the matter. She was aware that the world had grown colder since Marie-Thérèse’s death, that a particular quick artless voice would no longer question her, that a certain shyness and propriety had vanished from her own life, leaving behind something wary, fearful, disbelieving. This corroding residue was apt to interfere with her more generous impulses, and she had to struggle these days to trust her earlier, more primitive assumptions of safety. It was a feeling she only managed to recover among her books. And it had been revealed to her this evening, this momentous evening, that there was a safety beyond anything she had ever known, that the love of one person for another can confer such a charmed life that even the memory of it bestows immunity. She herself was not immune. And if she had one wish, it was to know that immunity,

\(^{224}\) Ibid. p. 60.
\(^{225}\) Ibid. pp. 61-62.
to be loved in such a way that even when parted from the other she would never be alone.\textsuperscript{226}

Although Kitty claims that she thinks little about her mother, whenever she thinks about her she goes through the same traumatic scenes again and again. The persistent, obsessive image Kitty has fixed in her mind’s eye is that of her mother dying with walnut shells in her hands, though now she has a new awareness, “that the world had grown colder since Marie-Thérèses’s death”, and significantly Kitty uses her mother’s name to think about her, instead of the words “my mother”, as if to distance her presence and remove the pain it causes her. Kitty’s thoughts reveal that she misses her mother and her presence in her life as she misses her voice. Kitty, in fact, misses everything about her mother, aware that her absence has left behind “something wary, fearful, disbelieving”, and the feeling to be unsafe. Without her mother Kitty feels that she is alone.

Gradually, the absence of Kitty’s mother is more manifest in Kitty’s thoughts and also in the world around her. Desperately needing a message to be assured about Maurice’s love for her, and worried about the lecture on the Romantic Tradition she has to prepare, Kitty consults a clairvoyant, Madame Eva. Inside the clairvoyant’s house, the room where Kitty and the woman are sitting is very dark, and the cushions smell “a comfortable frowsty odour”.\textsuperscript{227} The

\textsuperscript{226} Ibid. p. 72.
atmosphere inside this room is similar to that of Kitty’s grandparents’ house, and Kitty feels “oddly safe, for this was a secret place”.\textsuperscript{228}

Unexpectedly for Kitty, Madame Eva talks about her mother:

‘I see a lady. Your mother? Has she passed?’ Kitty looked at her uncomprehendingly, ‘Mother’, repeated the woman. ‘Has she passed on?’ Kitty nodded again, her throat thickening. This surprised her, for she had never wept for her mother, had never dared to. Did not even dare to think of Marie-Thérèse as her mother. The conjunction of the person and the concept would have moved her in a way she could not afford to imagine. ‘Mother’s watching’, said Madame Eva. Tears spilled over from Kitty’s eyes. ‘All right, darling’, said Madame Eva. ‘Mother’s watching’.\textsuperscript{229}

Madame Eva’s assurance that Kitty’s mother is watching her moves Kitty who cries for the first time for her dead mother, a thing she never dared to do before. The conjunction of the person, “Marie-Thérèse”, and the concept, “mother” is a thing Kitty cannot bear, because she is not ready to face the loss of her mother yet.

Towards the end of the novel Maurice is visiting the cathedrals of France, one of his subjects, and Kitty goes to France too, in the hope of meeting with him. Together they visit Saint-Denis, but, inside the basilica, oblivious of her presence, Maurice is never near Kitty, who wanders among the tombs of kings and queens while “an inexplicable feeling of dread made her linger near the door”.\textsuperscript{230} The disquieting sight of coupled kings and queens lying together as on

\textsuperscript{228} Ibid. p. 72.
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid. p. 74.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid. pp. 122-123.
“an eternal marriage bed” make Kitty think about love and death. Thus she concludes, “this was the reality, then. Death. And yet a death that seemed almost acceptable if one had a companion”. While Maurice is on his knees praying in front of a statue of the Virgin, Kitty searches for a candle to light to her mother, but there are not candles. As if failing to establish the connection with her mother through the candle, and feeling that Maurice has left her alone, Kitty addresses to her mother some sort of silent, personal prayer, weeping openly:

she said silently, Marie-Thérèse, dearest little mother, are you there? Is this what you wanted for me, your heart’s darling, on those evenings calm enough to quiet even your fears, when we walked together arm in arm in the tiny garden? Do you see him, my pious lover, for whom I wait in hotel rooms, whose notes I type, whose dinners I cook, and who will never marry me? He prays to the Madonna, a stone lady with a chipped face. Do you watch me, the daughter who amazed and alarmed you sometimes with her strange ambitions? Did you wish for something simpler, more docile, more predictable? You did not hand me on, as a parent should, but you were so scarcely a parent. You were a child, and perhaps all the children I shall ever have. Have you found him again, your husband, the father I never knew? Will you tell him who I am? You, so happy to be looked after by others, will you try to look after me? After a while she blotted her eyes carefully, and repaired her appearance as best she could.

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231 Ibid. 123.
232 Ibid. p. 124.
Kitty feels that she needs the guide of her mother to help her with Maurice, but in fact, she needs to feel her love again in her life. It is clear now that they loved one another, and remembering the time she passed with her mother, Kitty’s memories seem wrapped in longing.

When she was young, Marie-Thérèse was a quiet, gentle, graceful little girl, and her parent’s pride. She had attended a French school and thus she had acquired charming and formal manners. She became a widow shortly after her marriage took place, was diagnosed anaemia and a heart murmur, and she spent her time moving “slowly about the little flat, watering her plants, reading the romantic novels to which she was addicted and which Kitty sometimes borrowed”. 234

During the weekends, while Kitty’s grandmother usually made her a dress, Kitty remembered her mother watching or listening “dreamily to the radio, her place in her novel marked by a handkerchief”, 235 and her affectionate words to her “You know, my darling, there is no need for you to study so hard […]. I should like you to get out more and meet more people”. 236

In Kitty’s family, the making of a dress for any important occasion is a “rite of passage”, and an “essential preliminary”. 237

Kitty’s grandmother had made Marie-Thérèse’s wedding dress, “the most beautiful wedding dress Louise had ever made”, 238 and when Kitty had been

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234 Ibid. p. 13.
237 Ibid. p. 140.
shown the dress, “the beautiful pale pink wedding dress”, her mother had said to her “when you are ready, Maman Louise will make one for you”\textsuperscript{239}.

Nevertheless, instead of a wedding dress, Louise has to make a dress for her granddaughter’s lecture. Kitty is worried about the occasion because Maurice will be there and he has promised to give a dinner party for her to celebrate the event. Though it is not a wedding dress, and maybe the last dress Louise will make, the grandmother knows that it has to do with Kitty’s future life, and that she “must be there in the form of a guide”.\textsuperscript{240} The dress is made using a fabric with a symbolic meaning, as it is connected with the memory of Marie-Thérèse, and intended to favour her daughter:

> the honey-coloured silk, which had been wrapped in black tissue paper since the death of Marie-Thérèse, for whom it had been destined, would finally be made into a dress […] which would tip the scales in favour of her grand-daughter’s future.

Kitty thinks that the lecture she is about to give will change her life and ensure her a future with Maurice, after all, the dinner party he has organized is meant to celebrate her, she thinks.

As the day of the lecture approaches Kitty feels anxious and unbearably worried, so she decides to consult Madame Eva again. The clairvoyant talks about a wedding coming soon, and, thinking that this has to do with her and Maurice, Kitty feels suddenly assured and invigorated, she goes into a café and

\textsuperscript{238} Ibid. p. 10.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid. p. 11.
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid. p. 141.
eats a substantial breakfast with great pleasure, while “a general sense of
euphoria seemed to have overtaken her”.\textsuperscript{241} Kitty’s lecture is a success, and for
the first time in her life she feels “nothing but confidence in the future”.\textsuperscript{242}

The day appointed for the dinner party Kitty is restless, and finally she decides
to take a rest. When she awakes she senses “a strange and unanticipated feeling
of desolation”, and hopes that she is not “going to sink into the panic that
sometimes overtook her without warning”.\textsuperscript{243}

What worries her most is the dinner itself; in fact Kitty is afraid of her past that
is still haunting her:

she found herself worrying whether she would be able to eat, in this great
heat, and the very reflection brought with it an echo of that terrible cry,
‘Marie-Thérèse! Marie-Thérèse!’ \textit{It was the source of all her woes.} But
that is over, she assured herself, struggling against despair. This panic is
quite irrational, due to nothing more serious than discomfort and low
blood sugar. Make tea, and after tea, go out and buy an evening paper.
She followed her own advice as if it had been dictated by someone else,
but noticed that the hand holding the cup was shaking very slightly.\textsuperscript{244}

Identifying the cause of “all her woes” with the loss of her mother, Kitty places
her ultimate hopes for happiness and safety in Maurice, but she is soon
disillusioned. Maurice, in fact, is engaged with Miss Jane Fairchild, one of
Kitty’s students, and as an acknowledged couple they take their places at either
end of the dinner table, while Kitty thinks:

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid. p. 170.
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid. p. 179.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid. p. 181.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid. p. 181. Emphasis added.
I lacked the information […] trying to control her trembling hands. Quite simply, I lacked the information. She had the impression of having been sent right back to the beginning of a game she thought she had been playing according to the rules.\textsuperscript{245}

The final sentences of \textit{Providence} reinforce the novel’s circularity, ending with the same words of the beginning. It is a circular pattern of downfall:

‘I must confess, Miss Maule, that we were discussing you before you arrived. We were trying to work out which half of you was French.’ The Roger Fry Professor’s wife exploded into sudden high-pitched laughter. ‘It was Kitty’s mother,’ supplied Maurice. ‘Isn’t that right, Kitty?’ ‘My father was in the army,’ said Kitty Maule slowly. ‘He died before I was born.’ And picking up her spoon, she prepared to eat.\textsuperscript{246}

\textsuperscript{245} Ibid. p. 189.

\textsuperscript{246} Ibid. p. 189.
4. LEAVING HOME

*Leaving Home* is the penultimate novel written by Anita Brookner.

It narrates the story of Emma Roberts, a young English student researching garden design.

The plot of *Leaving Home* is similar to that of the early novels, and Emma is a heroine bearing traces of Ruth’s attitude in *A Start in Life*, while her mother is more similar to Kitty’s mother in *Providence*.

As in the early novels, there is an essential connection with France, in fact the young protagonist goes to France to study, she meets potential lovers, while her mother’s death, occurring at some point, forces the heroine to go back home, paralyzing her, leaving her to face pain and grief, and trying to recover from her mother’s loss.

Emma is an only child, and her mother is a widow. They live together in London, in a flat, “as discreet as [Emma’s] mother quiet temperament demanded”.  

Leaving the decision to others, and thus feeling not guilty about it, Emma leaves home for the first time to study classical garden design in France. Her main interest in it is in the theory that shaped those gardens, “the classical code – reticence, sobriety, order”, but though the subject attracts her, it is also a pretext to leave home, for securing her liberty. In fact, besides her interest in gardens, the real reason to go away from home is her need to leave her mother.

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248 Ibid. p. 6.
Emma’s father died when she was three, and thus, Emma feels that he had failed in his task of taking care of her mother, a duty she does not want to inherit, determined instead to leave home.

Emma’s only relative is her mother’s brother, Rob, who - “would be delighted for [her] to become [her] mother’s support and provider”, and who supports them financially from Emma’s grandfather income of investment in and ownership of modest properties. Emma dislikes him for bearing this burden “grimly”, and for his arrogance towards her mother when discussing about finance.

As brother and sister their relationship is “extraordinarily close”, almost morbid, in fact, Emma’s uncle never married, her sister remaining “the one fixed point” in his life.

Coming home from France for a brief visit, Emma asks some money to move away from the student hostel where she is living in Paris, and find a place more comfortable for the last few weeks of her stay there. Her request shocks both her mother and uncle, and though Emma believes that, “it suited them both to have [her] out of the way, thus guaranteeing their original alliance, which must have been disrupted by her [mother’s] marriage and further by [her] birth”, her uncle wants her to stay at home to take care of her mother. He reacts intemperately to Emma’s words - “Are you mad? Your place is here, keeping an eye on your mother. You’ve had your adventure. It’s time to get a

249 Ibid. p. 8.
250 Ibid. p. 25.
251 Ibid. p. 27.
252 Ibid. p. 28.
job. Settle down. Here’, and later he says to her, “Your mother is not a strong woman. Inevitably she will need help. I need hardly remind you of your obligations”. As those statements reveal, Emma’s uncle openly dislikes her, and she is at fault simply for being her father’s child, the man who stole his sister from him, yet, Emma is strong enough to perceive this as unjustified.

Emma’s mother, whose name is never mentioned, is a woman of “strange constraints”, her daughter observes her mother’s inadequacy, “her inability to merge her experience with that of others, her silent days spent in mysterious rumination”, being, nonetheless, “an adult of whom others seemed to approve”. Still a child, Emma is aware of her mother’s weak disposition, her lack of friends, and her reclusive, almost claustrophobic life. Though imagining her mother as a beauty when young, she is aware that - “[her] beauty was undermined by an innocence that never left her. She longed for an ideal life which would not betray her, became married because her own mother wished it, and survived widowhood almost as a return to her natural state”. Aware of sadness in her mother’s life, “only contained, only bearable if left undisturbed”, Emma’s need to leave home is amplified. Her mother’s frailty,

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253 Ibid. p.29.  
254 Ibid. p. 30.  
255 Ibid. p. 7.  
256 Ibid. pp. 2-3.  
257 Ibid. p. 4.
and “her early demise”, make Emma feel doomed to follow her mother’s destiny, unless she looks for “safety elsewhere”.258

I never knew a woman so inactive, her days reserved for reading and thinking. I soon learned not to disturb either process. Yet I think she was lonely, a perception that filled me with distress. We loved each other greatly, yet so exclusive was that love that it was experienced more like anguish.259

The relationship between mother and daughter is so exclusive because each one of them has only the other one:

we took each other for granted. We were each other’s familiars, ghosts, even, and this was no occasion for full-blown expressions of feeling. The anxiety I habitually felt for the remnants of what had never been a family was also familiar. And yet I knew that what was left would have to do duty for what was missing.260

Accepting calmly Emma’s decisions, her mother is not unwilling to let her daughter go, though this implies that each one of them will be on her own and alone. In fact, loneliness is quite a natural state for Emma’s mother, and –“a matter she found so easy that she had no fears for [her daughter’s] own coming isolation”,261 moreover, knowing that her daughter needs to see the world and

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258 Ibid. p. 3
259 Ibid. p. 3.
260 Ibid. p. 25.
261 Ibid. p. 7.
make friends, Emma’s mother is aware that her daughter’s scholarship is – “an appropriate way of severing the connection with [their] so quiet way of life”.\textsuperscript{262} Notwithstanding her decision to leave home and her mother, Emma feels guilty and uncertain about it – “the act of leaving her to her fate seemed hazardous”,\textsuperscript{263} and Emma’s concerns are less for herself than for her mother’s safety and comfort, as she perceives herself to be the one who ensures them to her.

Emma experiences the relationship between her and her mother as exclusive, strong, but maybe it is at the same time too close, airless, symbiotic and quite morbid too, and as a result the thought to be separated the one from the other leads to feelings of anguish. Although they love “each other greatly”, her mother distances Emma, and there seem to be no real intimacy between them, and a difficulty in showing tangible signs of affection.

Coming home from Paris, Emma catches the amazing sight of “a camellia bush in full bloom”, and she reflects how – “nature, bizarrely, would propose advantages if one would only lower one’s expectations, if one could keep one’s eyes fixed on this universal endowment, as opposed to that heartfelt intimacy which was one’s most primitive need”.\textsuperscript{264} At home, while standing at the door, mother and daughter embrace, greeting each other, and while Emma is “filled with a rush of love” for her mother,\textsuperscript{265} she instead leaves her alone at the flat’s door going away to do the shopping.

\textsuperscript{262} Ibid. p. 7.
\textsuperscript{263} Ibid. p. 7.
\textsuperscript{264} Ibid. p. 24. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid. p. 25.
The natural disposition of the character of Emma’s mother is reticence, and this is also what constitutes the basis of their shared life, but during the few months she had been living in Paris, Emma has grown accustomed –“not only to a different landscape but to a different mindset”  

At home, Emma is starting to perceive the difference between the life she was starting to enjoy in Paris, and the one she is bound to live in London, in her mother’s sphere:

[In Paris,] even in my reduced circumstances I was aware of sharper contrasts, bolder exchanges. I should now have to reacquaint myself with a more ruminative way of life. The people I saw through the window of the taxi seemed to walk with averted eyes, wholly possessed by some interior monologue, as if they had never exchanged intimate confidences and were now schooled in the kind of enquiries which made no reference to the emotions. I missed the boldness of greetings, offered to friends and strangers alike, that had been the commerce of my early mornings: even my daily journeys to the library had been enlivened by an emphatic salutation, as if I were a legitimate inhabitant, going about an entirely honourable activity, just like those strangely confident people whom I passed in the streets and to whom I offered an equally confident ‘Bonjour!’

Here, I knew, I should have to accept a degree of indifference, as if I had not walked these streets all my life, should have to modify eager curiosity – the sort of curiosity surely everyone must feel – into a dutiful consideration of the weather, of the daily alteration in the light as the season changed winter into spring. There was indeed much to be noted in this muted nature which cast its understated dominance over a population schooled in acceptance rather than revolution.  

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266 Ibid. p. 23.
This explains why, when she emerges “dripping from the bath”, like the incarnation of Botticelli’s Venus emerging from the foams of the sea, and, without worrying about anything, she wraps a towel around herself and makes for her bedroom, her mother seeing her naked shoulders and legs reproves her saying: “Emma! [...] What are you thinking of? Supposing Rob had seen you like that?”

In fact, Emma’s nakedness causes so sharp a contrast with her mother’s custom that it shocks her, while her mother’s reaction to it shocks Emma. Nonetheless, Emma’s mother truly loves her daughter, though unable to manifest it, and, in fact, as —“the unspoken celebration of [her] return”, Emma sees that her mother has made her bed —“with fresh sheets and the covers turned down” and this moves her, melting her heart.

While in Paris, Emma is changing, or maybe she is starting to discover her true nature, even though her old self, near her mother, is still prevailing in her, as shown by the description of the last day they spend together, before Emma’s return to Paris —“we passed the slow day together, reading. I was beginning to mirror her habits, her reclusion”.

When Emma leaves home for the first time to go to France, to study classical garden design, she is in search of —“a certain symmetry, a place of excellence”, to make her own. She is aware that behind the concept that

268 Ibid. p. 27.
269 Ibid. p. 27.
270 Ibid. p. 31.
271 Ibid. p. 6.
inspired the gardens she wants to study lies the possibility of a different future for her, “removed from the tame and unambitious customs that were [her] true inheritance”, and furthermore, garden design’s appeal for Emma lies in the fact that it is - “at the furthest possible remove from a sensible life plan”. Her only reason to be afraid of leaving home is her mother’s loneliness, but a part from this she is determined and without apparent fear:

I had to shed certain burdens which I had inherited from my mother, a tendency to melancholy, to rumination, an acceptance of solitude. I saw these characteristics as dangerous, as indeed they were, and I saw my mother as something of an anomaly in the world which I envisaged for myself and which I intended to inhabit.

Saying goodbye to her mother, while they are parting, Emma feels a pang of anguish, but though she is leaving, at the back of her mind she has the certainty that she can always return home.

Emma’s first impression of Paris is that of a prison. Her first day at the hostel awakens in her feelings of displacement and despair. She wonders how to survive in that situation, and at the same time she is willing to go back home as soon as possible, overwhelmed by a - “feeling of estrangement that was [her]

272 Ibid. p. 6.
273 Ibid. p. 8.
274 Ibid. p. 9
initial experience of life away from home”. Gradually Emma’s perception of Paris changes, as she comes to love the city while discovering it:

I came to know and love the city, not only for its most public attributes, its history, its monuments, but in small overlooked corners, unfashionable churches, outlying bus stops where I found a quieter, more modest population, suburban squares where children played.

After the initial impact with a new city and with a new life without her mother, Emma slowly becomes acclimatized, even though she still has feelings of disappointment and loneliness:

the formality which is the essence of the classical garden settled on me like a beneficent shroud, shielding my melancholy from intrusive eyes. But my work, my disguise, consoled me for what I was obliged to forgo: love, friendship, warmth, familiarity.

Not surprisingly, the place where she feels most comfortable at is the library, where, “the silent atmospheres, the bent heads of the readers”, convey a reassuring feeling. Emma seems unaware that she is now accepting and welcoming silence, while instead, at home, her previous feelings about it differed consistently, perceiving silence as unnatural – “I was aware of […] silence which had always depressed me, and even disturbed me, for I thought it

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275 Ibid. p. 12.
276 Ibid. p. 12.
277 Ibid. p. 13.
278 Ibid. p. 11.
unnatural for life to be extinguished in this way”. 279 The silent atmosphere of the library is reassuring for Emma, as it is similar to the silent atmosphere of her home, and the bent heads of the readers remember her of her mother while reading a book sitting on her sofa, though she – “strangely […] did not think too much of [her, and Emma] had no plans to return to her”. 280

In Paris, Emma is careful not to make friends for fear to reveal her –“horrible unreadiness, only to encounter in return an expression of surprise, even of condemnation, from those who managed the transition better than [she] ever could”, 281 but, at the library, she meets Françoise, a French girl, who works at the stacks. Her beauty and her provocative behaviour fascinate Emma, and while Françoise uses her as a harmless, suitable confidante, Emma becomes her audience – “I was […] in some essential way the one to whom she could reveal herself without fear or favour”. 282 Thus, instead of being a real friend for Françoise, Emma has a “useful function” towards her, 283 and they share some sort of unnatural friendship that suits them both. As the only daughter of a widowed mother:

Françoise appeared to consider her mother as much a problem as I did mine. She did not, however, betray in any way the anguish I had long felt in connection with my mother; rather the opposite. Her mother, I gathered, was something of a cheerful antagonist whom she understood

279 Ibid. p. 10.
280 Ibid. p. 13.
281 Ibid. p. 11.
282 Ibid. p. 16.
283 Ibid. p. 17.
Françoise’s relationship with her mother contrasts with the one Emma has with hers and it makes Emma rethink her mother’s attitude in a critical way for the first time – “surely, I thought, the mother who had raised so confident a daughter could hardly resemble my own, with her silences, her reclusion, her so discreet love for me.” Perceiving a dangerous resemblance between her mother’s reticence and her own, Emma starts to think whether her own behaviour is the result of her personality or the inheritance of her mother’s influences. When she is invited for a weekend at L’Ermitage, Françoise’s house in the countryside, Emma is aware also of the inadequacy of her dresses and appearance, unsuitable for formal occasion, and seeing the elegance of Françoise’s mother, Mme Desnoyers, and her determination, that of a woman of pure will, Emma compares her with her mother:

The contrast with my mother could not have been more plainer. My mother, a pretty though faded woman, whose active life was all too clearly behind her, made little physical impact, dressed simply in skirts and cardigans, and though no doubt satisfied with my appearance made no attempt to improve it. I did not possess the sort of clothes that were called upon to make an impression, nor was there any need for them to do so: we knew few people likely to visit, kept no servants, and went to bed early. Even I, in the hotel went to bed early. I was too introspective to enjoy unfamiliar company […]. It was only with Françoise that I discussed weighty matters of will and desire, and even with Françoise I

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284 Ibid. pp. 16-17.
285 Ibid. p. 16.
did little more than listen. I thought, with a certain discomfort, that perhaps my mother should have done more for me in the way of instruction, of preparation. I was almost angry with her until I reflected that such anger as I felt should more properly have been directed against myself.\textsuperscript{286}

For Emma, Françoise has the useful function of strengthening her will, to widen her expectancies. In Françoise’s company Emma starts to perceive her own desires:

Françoise’s gift to me, apart from her unlooked-for friendship, was to encourage desires for expansion. She saw, as I did not, that I was in drastic need of a life of my own. So far this had not materialized, and she was indignant on my behalf, though only for a minute or two.\textsuperscript{287}

This is the reason why, once she is back in Paris, after her brief return home, Emma leaves the hostel, where she had been living, and moves to a room of her own in a small hotel, while in the meantime a new consciousness arises in her, “that I could form new habits, venture farther afield”.\textsuperscript{288}

Notwithstanding Françoise’s unexpected help Emma is aware of a “cardinal difference” between them when she thinks about her mother and her loneliness:

I would, however reluctantly, be drawn back by the fact of another’s loneliness, though that loneliness frightened and repelled me. Even the

\textsuperscript{286} Ibid. p. 46.
\textsuperscript{287} Ibid. pp. 20-21.
\textsuperscript{288} Ibid. p. 32.
thought of going home, even for a weekend, made me hesitate. I needed Françoise’s determination, rather than my own, to put plans into motion. That was why her company was so good for me.\textsuperscript{289}

But the difference between Françoise and herself may not be so great as Emma thinks, in fact, Françoise too is – “bound by a complicated loyalty [to her mother] which could only be shaken off as the physical distance between herself and her mother increased”.\textsuperscript{290}

The death of Emma’s mother occurs while Emma is in Paris, after the weekend spent at L’Ermitage. The sight of Françoise’s house constitutes for her – “the first \textit{coup de foudre} [she] had ever experienced. Others were to follow, but few could compare with that first sighting”.\textsuperscript{291} In fact, through the beauty of the house and its surroundings, after her first impact with Mme Desnoyers and the house itself, a totally new and unexpected dimension opens before Emma, who becomes aware of other dimensions and possibilities in life:

\begin{quote}
 such behaviour, such physical ease seemed to me to belong to a different sphere from what I had previously known. Here was space, lightness, beauty; more than any of these, here was authority. It was an authority that existed independently of its owners, and I understood instinctively how essential it was that such house should be preserved.\textsuperscript{292}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{289} Ibid. p. 21.
\textsuperscript{290} Ibid. p. 51.
\textsuperscript{291} Ibid. p. 42.
\textsuperscript{292} Ibid. pp. 42-43.
\end{flushright}
The coup de foudre experienced through the sight of the magnificent house arises passion for the first time in Emma’s life. Back in Paris, that same night, Emma has – “a dream of bliss so rare that [she] knew it was unconnected to anything [she] had ever experienced”: 293

The details immediately escaped me when I woke, but I knew, simply and conclusively, that I was loved. I was left with an impression of golden light […] the light of the sun in mid-heaven. Maybe the mere fact of eating at someone else’s table was responsible for the feeling of being included, or maybe it was a warning that the circumstances of my present untethered life were inadequate. […] In the light of this dream I dismissed my customary timid pleasures and realized that something else was called for. […] The gift of such happiness, the happiness of the dream, although entirely human - for I knew it did not pertain to the hereafter – was arbitrary. One might or might not encounter it, but only as a gift. So unmistakable had it been that I knew I should remember it, whether or not it was ever to be repeated. It seemed that even this was unlikely. Beautiful as the feeling had been, its only effect was to expose a condition of longing, and the knowledge that it must be sought, but also that it might not be found. 294

As her unconscious reveal her through her dream, Emma is evolving to a new conscience of herself and of her desires, and it is almost with a feeling of surrender, previously unknown to her, that she abandons her old self and she feels that she is laying herself, “open to all sorts of extravagance, depredation, and a kind of inventiveness which was not in fact [her] nature”. 295 But, as her

293 Ibid. p. 52.
295 Ibid. p. 54.
dream had shown – “beauty had been revealed, either real or imagined, and
[ she] could no longer live with its absence”.296

Thus, Emma cannot even contemplate the thought of leaving Paris for London,
as this would imply the fact that she should have to go back to her mother’s
home and live her reclusive, airless life as if it was her own. Emma is
changing, blossoming to a new perception of life, her thoughts fill with light
and lightness, they reflect her awareness of a “radiant day”, of “an almost
impalpable air of renewed enthusiasm in the steps of passers-by”,297 due to the
incoming spring, or the perception of precious time spent watching children
playing, while sitting on a bench at the Luxembourg. So she decides that she
has to find a job and remain in Paris, – “that now vanishing memory of beauty,
revived by the almost cloudless sky […] determined me to stay in this place, if
possible for ever”.298

The sudden and unexpected death of Emma’s mother occurs while Emma has
already decided to stay in Paris, away from her, and when for the first time in
her life she has dared to make an autonomous decision not including someone
else’s will in her plans, not even her mother. Death breaks the link Emma has
with her mother. It is a knot Emma was not ready yet to untie and that brings
her back immediately, disruptively to her old self. At this point in the novel we
assist at Emma’s painful regression facing various stages of grief, while she is
trying to cope with the loss of her mother and her sense of guilt.

296 Ibid. p. 54. Emphasis added.
297 Ibid. p. 54.
298 Ibid. p. 55.
Hearing the news of her mother’s death at the telephone, Emma fainted. Then, during her journey home, she loses consciousness and sleeps so soundly that as a result – “ever since then sleep or the approaches of sleep have been accompanied by a feeling of terror, of omens” – for her. Now Emma is alone in the world, and she is conscious of experiencing an unprecedented kind of solitude, but she is aware that she has to face the loss alone, though she is not ready to do it yet:

This was a task I had to perform alone and would have to continue to carry out until such time as I should be allowed to forget it, or if not forget – for who could forget this? – to consign it to a past I was not eager to relieve. All I could hope for was oblivion, or some form of amnesia, yet I knew that I should have to stay awake, remain vigilant, although a perverse drowsiness slowed my steps as I made my way out into a solitude greater than I had ever known.

When she arrives home, Emma sits in a chair, “careful, even in that extremity, to avoid [her] mother’s place on the sofa, and foundered again.”

Leaving her mother before returning to Paris, Emma’s uncle had reproached her with the assumption that she should have stayed at home with her mother, and Emma had felt - “a flicker of guilt”, thinking that she was leaving her mother alone. At that time Emma had noted that, “[her] mother looked thinner, even slightly frail, and this disturbed [her] anew. [She] felt that [she] was

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299 Ibid. p. 57.
300 Ibid. p. 57.
301 Ibid. p. 57.
302 Ibid. p. 30.
obliged to worry on her behalf, and might be expected to continue to do so”\textsuperscript{303}. Now that her mother is dead her uncle accuses her saying that it is Emma’s fault, “of course you should have been there. If you’d stayed at home, as you should have done, none of this would have happened. […] The least you could have done was to keep her company”, \textsuperscript{304} but, the real truth is that beyond her uncle’s accuses it is Emma who reproaches herself, as she was aware of her mother’s loneliness. Emma was not with her mother when she died, and her mother spent even the last days of her life alone:

I could see that she was lonely. That was what was unforgivable. No one should live as my mother had done, perhaps keeping to herself intimations of a weakness that was not of her mind but of the body.\textsuperscript{305}

Emma cannot weep, her eyes are dry. Wandering about the flat and into her mother’s bedroom she sees her bed and her wardrobe, thinking that – “already these things looked like relics”.\textsuperscript{306} In her mother’s bag she finds, “a lace-edged handkerchief of which she was fond”, \textsuperscript{307} and she takes for herself this handkerchief, and it is the only object belonging to her mother that she keeps for herself. She does this knowing that her mother liked it, and maybe also because it was near her, inside her bag, when she died, so that having with her her mother’s handkerchief Emma feels somehow her mother’s presence. This

\textsuperscript{303} Ibid. p. 29.  
\textsuperscript{304} Ibid. p. 58.  
\textsuperscript{305} Ibid. p. 59.  
\textsuperscript{306} Ibid. p. 59.  
\textsuperscript{307} Ibid. p. 59.
is what Emma can tolerate for the moment, and the sight of her mother’s objects and of her bedroom is more than what she can bear.

Emma is aware that her mother’s life – “was not the sort of life lived by a normal woman”, yet she knows that, “this training in solitary pursuits was what united [them] both”, and seeming to have forgotten everything about how she felt in Paris, Emma is conscious that her linkage with her mother lies in that solitary reclusive life. This explains why she considers to – “match her courage”, and live a life like that of her mother, “either that or turn [her] back on such a legacy completely and make [her] way into an indistinct future”. An old lady comes to Emma’s flat and offers her a dish of stuffed peppers, and this moves her “unbearably”. Though *Leaving Home* has not the insistence on food that characterised Brookner’s early novels, it seems logical to equate in Emma’s mind the offer of food with an offer of love of some kind, as in this case it is the warmth and the sympathy of a neighbour who cares for her.

Without the presence of her mother, the atmosphere inside the flat is unbearable for Emma, who has the perception of an –“abyss that had opened so suddenly under [her] feet”, and when she goes to bed that evening, it is with a feeling of terror that she approaches sleep. The day before this, Emma had had that strange, radiant dream of bliss, and she knows that it, “had to do with

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308 Ibid. p. 60.
309 Ibid. p. 60.
310 Ibid. p. 60.
311 Ibid. p. 60.
312 Ibid. p. 61.
hope, with a promise of fulfilment”,\textsuperscript{313} while now suddenly everything has changed, and closing her eyes Emma has a sensation of falling:

as I felt my eyes finally close it was not relief that I felt but a sensation of falling, and the threat of a fear from which there might be no release.\textsuperscript{314}

While she was in Paris, Emma had known a young man, Michael, with whom she went for long walks, and who was, “as reticent as [she] was”.\textsuperscript{315} Together they visited the gardens, sitting there “like a very old couple”,\textsuperscript{316} though they were not in love with each other. In fact, they spent time together for companionship – “we had delivered each other from a solitude that would eventually have saddened us”,\textsuperscript{317} and when she thinks of him Emma knows that more than a friend she considers him as her brother. Now Emma thinks back to their friendship and to those walks as if belonging to a time and a place lost forever:

the innocence of that friendship pertained to youth, almost to childhood, and that time was at an end. My heaviness of spirit, and of body, was that of a reluctant adult, beset with adult arrangements, adult decisions. It was only when I heard the sound of my uncle’s key in the door that I regressed: a true adult, such as I thought I had become, would have asked for the key to be given back.\textsuperscript{318}

\textsuperscript{313} Ibid. p. 62.
\textsuperscript{314} Ibid. p. 62.
\textsuperscript{315} Ibid. p. 33.
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid. p. 34.
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid. p. 36.
\textsuperscript{318} Ibid. p. 65.
Even though Emma thinks herself in terms of a reluctant adult, she is in fact regressed to a little, fearful child left alone and in need for protection. She would like to have someone taking decisions on her behalf, and she thinks that this – “unfinished internal debate on the nature of self-sufficiency, on its limits, and on the character requirements necessary for a good outcome”,\(^{319}\) was the debate her mother should have had with herself, and Emma perceives a danger in this – “if I were not extremely vigilant I might run the risk of living her life all over again. This prospect frightened me very much”.\(^{320}\)

Emma’s ambivalent attitude towards the flat where she lived with her mother marks her restlessness. Initially, she could not bear the thought of living there, but subsequently she becomes increasingly unwilling to leave it, thus bearing traces of her mother’s reclusion, as if living in her shadow. Emma is not only regressed, she is also depressed, and a tangible sign of this is her increasing need for solitude, her surrender to darkness and her early nights:

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I went to bed earlier and earlier, and lay there waiting to fall asleep. The dread that I had experienced on that first night had not disappeared, but now I knew that it would always be with me […] and that I could and should live with it. It is perhaps significant that I found waking much more problematic, part of the inevitable decision-making from which I was not to be relieved. […] My real deliverance was nowhere in sight.\(^{321}\)
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\(^{319}\) Ibid. p. 65.
\(^{320}\) Ibid. p. 65.
\(^{321}\) Ibid. p. 66.
Emma needs darkness, she needs to sink into her grief to know it, understand it, come to terms with it and finally accept it. It is the beautiful light of spring that delivers her from her torpor, but though she accepts Françoise’s offer to spend a weekend at L’Ermitage, the night before she sleeps badly, waking – “in a fever of impatience to get the day, the weekend over, so that [she] could go back to being obscure and undiscovered”.\(^{322}\) Mme Desnoyers takes Emma in her arms and finally she can weep for the loss of her mother for the first time:

When she did appear she greeted me with a kindness for which I was unprepared. So unprepared was I that the tears I had not shed since my mother’s death made their way down my cheeks and grew more abundant as I tried to check them. She surveyed me almost thoughtfully, then took me in her arms.\(^{323}\)

Later that evening when it is time to go to bed Françoise’s mother says: “I am tired. We must all go to bed. *Bonne nuit, mes filles*.\(^{324}\) For one evening Emma feels to be a daughter again. This means that she feels linked to someone again, no more isolated, included and somewhat accepted and loved: “I never forgot that. It seemed like a sign that I still existed as a daughter, that my daughterly condition was once more acceptable”.\(^{325}\) This is a decisive experience for Emma, the experience of being included once again, and it marks a new stage in her path through the understanding of her loss.

\(^{322}\) Ibid. p. 70.
\(^{323}\) Ibid. p. 70.
\(^{324}\) Ibid. p. 71.
\(^{325}\) Ibid. p. 71.
Back in London, Emma’s English friend Sarah wants her to meet a man, Philip. Emma accepts an invitation to dinner, because she experiences—“a nascent longing for a less isolated life.”\(^{326}\) From this point in the novel, Emma shows small signs of recovery, though she is still grieving her loss. Philip Hudson is a doctor, a man twice Emma’s age, divorced and with a son. Sarah presents him to Emma for her benefit, and they start a relationship devoid of intimacy. Philip is a man, “wounded by love and not knowing how to recover,”\(^ {327}\) as he still loves his wife. What unites him and Emma is their emotional background, in fact they have both experienced the loss of a loved one from their lives and they both are trying to recover. Emma helps herself also with her work on French gardens, but though seeming to live, she is only surviving and at the back of her mind she is aware that something essential, vital is missing. While walking the streets of London with Philip the first evening they meet, Emma’s thought goes to the roses of La Malmaison, the rose garden planted by empress Joséphine de Beauharnais, displaying an exceptional variety of roses—“the roses would now be in bloom at Malmaison, I thought with a pang.”\(^ {328}\) Emma’s mind is not in the conversation she is having with Philip. Both her mind and her heart are among the roses at the Malmaison. She knows that should be there, seeing the sight of that beauty and smelling the scent. Emma feels part of it, a part of that beauty, yet the thought that she is the only one who can decide about her fate is still far from her consciousness. The loss of her mother and her sense of guilt are still tight bonds that make her feel

\(^{326}\) Ibid. p. 85.
\(^{327}\) Ibid. p. 88.
\(^{328}\) Ibid. p. 81.
bound to her mother’s flat and to London, though she feels out of place and exile there.

The sight of Mark, Philip’s son, is another coup de foudre for Emma.

After a dinner together Emma accompanies Philip to his flat. The atmosphere of the flat is bleak, and Emma is – “aware of a chill which seemed not so much physical as emotional”. 329 It makes her think about herself, her work, the flat where she lives, and her life devoid of love:

solitude may favour study but is insufficient if one’s aim is creative thinking. And one might encounter an inconvenient longing for company, intimacy, and the anticipation of similar delights. […] I knew that however pleasant this day had been, much was left out. Politeness had kept us in order, but prolonged politeness might prove unsustainable. 330

While she is in this mood, before leaving Philip’s flat she goes upstairs to the bathroom. It is there that she sees Mark sleeping, as Psyche herself had seen Cupid- Eros, and a further shift in her consciousness takes place:

I walked up the stairs as unobtrusively as I could. The doors on the right were open. Through one I caught the sight of a rumpled bed, and on it the body of a young man. Unable to prevent myself from doing so I tiptoed in. He – Mark, presumably was fast asleep. His sleep seemed to me exceptional, total, his arms flung out, his face classical in its emptiness. For a moment I contemplated him, as Psyche once contemplated Cupid, raising her lamp, willing him not to wake and witness her transgression. At the sight of this surrendered nakedness I saw what had been missing

329 Ibid. p. 87.
330 Ibid. p. 85.
from my life. It was another *coup de foudre*, information received, I would have welcomed some sign of comprehension, even of willingness to talk, but I was alone in this discovery, and perhaps one always is. I could appreciate the virtues of taciturnity, as I could with Michael, but now I had seen what was infinitely more desirable. the arms flung out, the expression of satiety. It was only sleep, I reminded myself, but I did not see how anyone could have enough of it.331

Emma’s sudden perception of the essential component missing from her life is passion. Of the importance of beauty, she was already aware, after the dream of bliss she had had in Paris, but now, even through the painful phase she is living, due to her mother’s loss, her own desires surface. But Emma is not ready yet for love as she is not free from her bond with her mother. Notwithstanding her impossibility to enjoy love in her life, she cannot ignore this new awareness, even though she tries to use her rational self to dismantle the disquieting perception of the safe life devoid of love she thinks that she wants for herself. Thus, trying to shed the thought of Mark away, Emma thinks about her sensible relationship with Philip:

this was an alliance to which any sensible woman might consent, had she not experienced the sudden illumination of her understanding what would be missed, and if she were exceptionally sensible, in spite of that. […] It would be an alliance in which only basic information would be shared, in which concealment would be taken for granted. It was the sort of alliance I enjoyed with Michael, precious in itself, but no longer adequate. In a bleak world, a world deprived of emotional comfort, this might suffice. It

331 Ibid. pp. 88-89.
would be calm, undemanding[...]. Yet at the same time I thought back to the figure on the bed and acknowledged my lack of joy.332

Thinking back the day spent in Philip’s company Emma considers it a pleasant day, because it passed in someone else’s company, maybe thinking that she can enjoy other days like that in the future, but, she cannot hide the fact that that pleasure – “was low-key, unemotional”.333 This leads her to wonder whether she can live a whole life like that – “there had been that sighting of a truth that was not negotiable, a revelation from which I could take no comfort”.334 The revelation is that of a life devoid of real happiness and love, but Emma is still needing safety, so she reduces her expectancies, and she cannot go as far as thinking why she should live her life like that.

Emma’s next step in her process of separation from her mother is a new flat. She needs to distance her mother, the ghost of her presence and her flat from her, which is why, with the money her mother has left her, she buys a new flat. Emma does this in a hurry, anxious to change her life and to possess a home of her own, and she finds that – “[her] residual uneasiness [...] had slightly diminished, but had not altogether vanished”.335 Emma cherishes the thought that removing herself from her mother’s flat she can remove the ghost of her mother’s presence from her life, because, even though time has passed since that death, the sight of her mother’s objects still causes her an unbearable pang of anguish. Emma’s wish is still oblivion, in fact, at this stage of grief she

332 Ibid. pp. 89-90.
333 Ibid. p. 92.
334 Ibid. p. 92.
335 Ibid. p. 99.
wants to consign her mother and her memory of her to the past, and forget about it living under the illusion that she can thus go on with her life:

I sat down at my mother’s desk and prepared to write my letters. It was a mistake. In the drawer I saw her pen, her cards, her small packet of tissues. I thought that I could smell her scent, but this was mere illusion. She came most vividly to mind when I knew that I should take nothing away from here. I wanted it to remain hers and now saw the rightness of handing it over to [my uncle]. One day I might come back, might even be glad to do so. But I sensed that that day was a long way off, at the end of my life, perhaps, and could not – should not – be anticipated.³³⁶

But, even the new flat, whose sight had enchanted her and shown her a possibility of a new life, frustrates Emma’s expectancies. Emma had hoped to inherit with the flat also the ease she had perceived in Alexandra’s life, the former owner of the flat, but when she is alone inside it she is forced to understand that it is not so:

quite suddenly my previous exhilaration had left me, and I sat stunned by the fact that I had so easily removed myself from what I had always known. If I clung to anyone or anything it was to the girl Alexandra and her equanimity in a similar situation. But then her future was clearly mapped out, whereas mine was a succession of empty days. Sheer displacement activity would be needed to keep me going, and I could see myself inventing further tasks in order to furnish my life with meaning.³³⁷

³³⁷ Ibid. p. 101.
Perceiving herself as “condemned to adulthood”, Emma is restless between London and Paris. She feels that she does not belong to either place, and she feels estranged even from her new flat, yet she accepts it for its safety, also doubting her own abilities to manage a life different from the one she has chosen:

I knew and accepted that the life I had chosen was the only one I could manage, and though I looked towards a future which contained nothing more sinister than boredom I was also quite clear about its safety, however anodyne and irritating that might turn out to be.  

The events that take place at the end of the novel are those that transform Emma’s consciousness. This happens because Emma experiences a new awareness of herself and her life and the occasion is another visit at L’Ermitage. Françoise’s mother has had a mild attack and is ill. Emma is unwilling to go there with Françoise, but she nonetheless accepts, “anxious to experience more intimacy than [she] had previously been allowed”. The day after their arrival, Françoise leaves the house to return to Paris where she has to meet her lover, while Emma remains alone with Mme Desnoyers to supply the role of nurse. After Françoise’s abrupt departure, and despite her assurance to come back soon, it is clear for Emma that her friend might not come back, tempted to follow her lover to America. Also the servants of the house understand this, and later they leave the house too. Emma remains alone with

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338 Ibid. p. 118.
340 Ibid. p. 150.
Françoise’s ill mother, isolated in a countryside house, and bound to take care indefinitely of her, waiting for Françoise’s return. Mme Desnoyers lays in her bedroom – “deeply asleep, her head fallen sideways on the pillow, her mouth open”, 341 and sitting by her bed Emma experiences an essential fragment of her relationship with her mother that was missing from her life as a daughter:

I straightened the sheet. I had never performed such services before: my own mother had died without me, in a crowded place, among strangers. These duties were hers by right, or should have been, if she had waited for me. I was an impostor here, not quite an attendant, even less a daughter. And I was so clearly superfluous that my presence was not noticed. But the demands of the helpless are so powerful that I felt constrained to sit by the bed, in case she woke and wondered what had happened. 342

Waiting for Françoise’s return Emma is alone, thinking a lot, living “a day like no other”. 343 Silence reigns over the house – “there was complete silence. The only noises I heard were in my head, dreams, or echoes of dreams”, 344 and while she thinks about Françoise’s past life Emma is also pondering her own life:

I understood, even more clearly, Françoise’s own desire, and the deliverance she sought from the rules which had stifled her throughout her upbringing and which now threatened to imprison her for the rest of her life. I even understood the suburban depths of my own soul, now

341 Ibid. p. 157.
342 Ibid. p. 158.
343 Ibid. p. 162.
344 Ibid. p. 161.
longing for pavements and street lights and the windows on to which I looked out from behind my own. This sudden feeling of displacement was radical; my life was circumscribed because I accepted it to be.\textsuperscript{345}

Even though Emma is reaching new awareness, this does not imply that an immediate change of behaviour will take place in her life, but the premises are there, and she is aware of her new task that is – “to come to terms with irreconcilables”.\textsuperscript{346} At the end of the novel Emma’s thoughts are these:

I am fully aware that changes may yet take place, that I may reflect on these matters, and decide, quite suddenly, that I desire something more, something ardent and unrealistic, rather as if I were Françoise, prepared, all that time ago, to seek fortune elsewhere. But then I know that both she and I have passed the age, and the stage of life, that permits such fantasies, and realize, perhaps a little bleakly, that both of us have done quite well, and that it would be pure folly to go in search of more […]. The only realistic ambition is to live in the present. And sometimes, quite often in fact, this is more than enough to keep one busy. Time, which was once squandered, must now be given over to the actual, the possible, and perhaps to that evanescent hope of a good outcome which never deserts one, and which should never be abandoned.\textsuperscript{347}

\textsuperscript{345} Ibid. p. 159.
\textsuperscript{346} Ibid. p. 168.
\textsuperscript{347} Ibid. p. 168.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


