

## The Riders: A Study of Motherhood and Absence

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### Abstract

Tim Winton's stories frequently have absented mothers. It might be a result of death, adversity, or their own volition. Trauma and suffering are closely related to motherhood, whether on the part of the mothers themselves, their spouses, or their children. In this paper, I'll discuss how motherhood and absence combined serve as metaphors for traumatic displacement. To help redefine cultural, national, and personal limits. It also provides light on Australia's problematic gender relations and their cultural representations. *The Riders* will be the primary focus of this paper's close-text study. Winton's previous books will be utilised to contextualise and support its arguments.

**Key words:** motherhood, tradition, gender relation, culture.

The reputation of Tim Winton is well-known both in Australia and globally. His stories are set in Winton's native Western Australia. It highlights the peculiarities of rural life that are formed by social and geographic isolation. His writing places a lot of emphasis on mothers, both living and dead. It also relates to how difficult and contentious motherhood is both as a human experience and as an institution. Winton portrays his male protagonists using typical gender stereotypes. They develop into sentimental, maternal, and domestic people who are frequently pushed to society's outskirts. The masculine characters are not marginalised as a result of this type of narrative exploitation of the feminine. Instead, because they have lost their traditional sphere of influence, women in the novels and mothers in particular are sidelined. In books like *Cloudstreet*, *The Riders*, and *Dirt Music*, the mother characters are clearly illustrated as being psychologically fragmented, alienated, or displaced in the microcosm of the family. Sarah A. Aguiar claims that female archetypes "were created and propagated by men as the traditional writers of civilization. The characters passed down through legend and the oral tradition, even if they originated in female consciousness, reveal a deeply ingrained capitulation to patriarchal doctrine" (134).

The masculine body is frequently connected with rehabilitation and healing in Winton's books, whereas the feminine body is equated with transience, lack, and self-destruction. The woman in this situation is driven back into the traditional role of the marked, the stigmatised gender, the good or the bad mother, despite the fact that she is both the bearer and opponent of the male gaze. Winton's female characters, particularly his mother figures, can frequently be critiqued for being overly one-dimensional and stereotyped in their outcomes despite the usually complex representation of women in his novels. This

dichotomisation of the female is exemplified in the characters of Dolly and Oriel in Winton's bicentenary novel *Cloudstreet*, who inhabits the stigma of both the uncaring and caring mother respectively. Oriel can be considered as the 1960s equivalent of the modern alpha mother, whose aspirations are excellence and perfection in parenthood.

In contrast to Dolly who is considered as a fallen woman. In contrast to Oriel's effective diligence, Dolly's alcoholism causes her to grow further estranged from her family. It impairs her ability to be a loving, caring mother. As a result, she is labelled as a bad mother. In the novel *Breath*, Eva and Grace represent a comparable binary that is already suggested by the characters' symbolic names and their fundamentally dissimilar worldviews. Eva is passionately embracing an alternative lifestyle and establishing herself outside of traditional conventions and expectations. Grace is the picture of convention: "Men, she said, were supposed to be turned off by all that fluid, the gross belly, the big backside and puffy ankles. That was normal" (203).

In Winton's writings, female children also form strong bonds to the male characters in the stories, which marginalises or excludes the mother, who either voluntarily renounces her motherly role or passes away due to an accident, suicide, or sickness. In the novel *Dirt Music* Rachel Nilsam's memory of Luther Fox's caretaking of his niece brings out the adult-child relations and evokes the image of a fatherly love that renders the maternal obsolete:

I remember him leaning in, singing to them [his niece and nephew]. Later I saw him with the little girl. She adored him, I think. He was rocking her to sleep with this look on his face, that look you see on breast-feeding women. You know, that dreamy, satisfied, slightly defiant look (268).

By portraying men as weak and domesticated, this explicit feminization of the male character exemplifies a trend in Australian society that seeks to undermine the stereotype of the egalitarian, rugged, and outspoken Aussie men. The wounded and damaged male body is often mentioned in this context in order to point out the representative transgression of the patriarchal stigma of white male's invisibility and universality. Winton assigns the act of mothering to the men in his stories by employing and reversing which refers to motherhood as practice and not as biological determinant. Scully in *The Riders* is passionately and devotedly mothering his daughter Billie. Him excluding his wife through the natural bond that he and Billie share. Which is alluded to in their similarities of outward appearance and character. Winton's reputed attempts at deconstructing existing gender stereotypes reflect his own upbringing when his father often did the housework before he headed off to work. In an interview with Elizabeth Guy Winton shares his personal experience: "I'm writing about it from an orthodox female point of view. My father cooked and cleaned and did the washing and put on his copper's uniform and went to work. I just thought that was normal" (129).

Absent mothers are also a constant factor in Winton's fiction, highlighting the central position and function of the mother figure in all his novels. Winton addresses this phenomenon of absence directly in the figure of the deserting mother, who abandons her family without warning, in his novel *The Riders*. Winton responds to feminist discourses by highlighting the fact that males can also suffer and that women abandon their husbands and

children. Winton creates a subtle nemesis in the novel, as Kaplan persistently states the “absent presence” (3) haunting the protagonist and depriving him of his home literally and metaphorically. Scully and his daughter Billie are left stranded in a strange continent after his wife abruptly left him to pursue her own vision of freedom and artistic fulfilment. Scully had been hoping to start a new life in Europe and build a home in Ireland. The protagonist, who appears to be kind. He has great anguish after losing his wife, and the reader cannot help but observe this suffering. According to Wachtel: “Scully has been the kind of a man who always stayed home, looked after the child, while his wife had a career. He’s been a follower and happy to do that.” (76)

As a result, the missing spouse, Jennifer, becomes the role of the perplexed, enigmatic Other. whose reasons for abandoning her family are never fully revealed in the tales of her husband and child and thus remain up to interpretation and speculative thought. Our sympathies go out to Scully and his daughter even if Jennifer's ghost continues to rule their lives. According to Arizti; the castration inflicted by Jennifer is symbolic: “she deprives Billie of nourishment and a maternal body, and she also causes a loss of identity in Scully” (41). Winton’s depiction of the circumstance soon fosters resentment towards a mother who neglects her child and her parental responsibilities. Deviating from the dominant Western expectation of how a responsible female parent is to behave, the unbecoming woman is seen as unfit or unnatural. This discrepancy between new and old family values, feminism and patriarchy, and issues of self-fulfilment and neglect is particularly resonant in this novel.

The characters in *The Riders*, where the mother forgoes her natural ability to bear children in favour of the chance of an artistic career. As the novel suggests, a homosexual connection, seem to be surrounded by a sense of censure. Jennifer becomes unmistakably identified as the enigmatic, unexplained, and perpetuating character. She appears cruel and cunning, unwilling or unable to talk. She fails to alleviate the suffering of her husband and daughter. In his agonising fixation, Scully adopts a victimised stance that, brings up the contentious discussion about men being the victims of domestic violence and paints him as an example of the damaged man in crisis.

The female characters in Winton's stories usually have disturbed attitudes on their femininity, which is reflected in their self-harming behaviours, deaths, and absences. On the one hand, motherhood is portrayed as redeeming, giving the characters a fulfilling existence through the conventional family structures even though it forbids women from expressing their sexual urge. However, individuals like Jennifer choose to abandon their families in order to reclaim their female sexuality and freedom. While simultaneously weakening the female through abstraction and categorization, Winton plainly writes from the mainstream perspective of a crisis in masculinity. Thus, patriarchal hegemonies are reaffirmed. In Winton's writing, the so-called terrible mother is largely silenced or demonised. The wounded man-in-crisis and bad mother tropes are thus employed in Winton's works to create a 'new' masculinity that defines itself by resorting to outdated stereotypes.

In conclusion, the paper discusses the frequent absence of mothers in Tim Winton's stories and how this absence serves as a metaphor for traumatic displacement. It explores the connection between trauma, suffering, and motherhood, highlighting the challenges faced by

mothers, their spouses, and their children. The paper focuses on Winton's novel *The Riders* for a close-text study, using his previous books to provide contextual support for the arguments made. Winton's writing places significant emphasis on mothers, both living and dead, and explores the difficulties and complexities of motherhood as a human experience and institution. His male protagonists often conform to traditional gender stereotypes but are pushed to society's outskirts, while women, particularly mothers, are sidelined and marginalized. The feminine body is associated with transience, lack, and self-destruction, while the masculine body is connected with healing and rehabilitation.

Winton's female characters, especially mother figures, are sometimes criticized for being one-dimensional and stereotyped in their outcomes, despite the overall complex representation of women in his novels. This contradiction is exemplified in characters like Dolly and Oriel in *Cloudstreet*, where Oriel represents the ideal caring mother, and Dolly is portrayed as a fallen woman. Female children in Winton's stories often form strong bonds with male characters, further marginalizing or excluding the mother figure. Absent mothers are a constant theme in Winton's fiction, highlighting the central role they play in his novels. In *The Riders*, Winton addresses feminist discourses by showcasing male suffering and depicting a mother who abandons her family.

Winton's depiction of the absent mother fosters resentment and portrays her as unfit and unnatural, deviating from societal expectations of responsible motherhood. This discrepancy between new and old family values, feminism and patriarchy, and self-fulfillment and neglect are a prevalent theme in his work. Overall, Winton's portrayal of mothers and their absence in his stories reflects cultural and gender issues in Australia. It reinforces traditional gender stereotypes and silences or demonizes the terrible mother. The wounded man-in-crisis and bad mother tropes are used to redefine masculinity, albeit resorting to outdated stereotypes.

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