

## MOTHERHOOD AND ABJECTION IN PETER CAREY'S *JACK MAGGS*

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### *Abstract*

*Jack Maggs* is a novel in which maternity plays an important role. The story significantly connects motherhood to the universal notion of Mother Earth in order to criticise the annihilating power that Mother Britain exercised over its people and colonies. Consequently, most mothers are presented as horrible beings who are able to hurt, and even kill, their children. In contrast, the only positive mother of the story turns into a kind of heroine. She does not only help the protagonist, but also becomes Australian, mother of Australians and the protector of the thus far marginalised voice of the colonies.

*Key Words:* motherhood, horror, the abject, Australia, the British Empire.

### *Resumen*

En *Jack Maggs* la maternidad desempeña un papel importante. La novela conecta maternidad con el concepto universal de Madre Tierra para criticar el poder aniquilador que la Madre Gran Bretaña ejercía sobre su pueblo y colonias. Por consiguiente, la mayoría de las madres son descritas como seres horribles capaces de herir, e incluso matar, a sus hijos. En contraste, la única madre positiva de la historia se convierte en una especie de heroína. Ella no sólo ayuda al protagonista, sino que también se convierte en australiana, madre de australianos y protectora de la hasta ahora marginalizada voz de las colonias.

*Palabras clave:* maternidad, horror, lo abyecto, Australia, el Imperio Británico

## INTRODUCTION

Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) is a new version of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1845) written from the perspective of Magwitch, the ex-convict in Dickens's novel. *Jack Maggs* tells the story of a thief who is

transported to Australia and the troubles he finds when he eventually returns to England. Although he is given a conditional pardon and is thus able to make a fortune in Australia, he finally decides to break the conditions of his pardon and go back to Britain to meet Henry, a young man in whom he has invested his money in order to turn him into the English gentleman he could never be. However, he does not expect to be so strongly rejected by the English, including Henry, so he is forced to open his eyes and see the true nature of his native country. He does not do it alone. Mercy, a maid who feels attracted to him and who he finally marries, helps him.

The purpose of this essay is to analyse the relevance of maternity in the novel, and how it is mostly presented from a gothic perspective, always framed by the colonial and postcolonial relationship between Britain and Australia. Since all the mothers, except one, are depicted in negative terms, I will begin by explaining the concept of the abject as a source of horror and its link with motherhood. I will also explore how the presentation of these horrible mothers is used to emphasise the contrasting function of Mercy, the only positive mother, drawing attention to its (post)colonial implications.

## MOTHERHOOD, HORROR AND THE ABJECT

The abject is related to the evolution of the psyche and the socialisation of an individual. Jacques Lacan calls this process “the mirror phase.” He declares that there are three orders in the psyche: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. All of them are important for the development of the self. The Real does not actually exist. It would exist if there were no language. The moment it is mediated by language, it becomes the truth, and thus ceases to be the Real because what is the truth for one may not be that for another. What exists is the Imaginary, a state of being which is imagined as real but which actually consists of images, fantasies and memories. This stage occurs in early infancy. The child imagines itself in total unity with its mother and the world. The founding moment of the Imaginary is “the mirror phase,” when the child sees its reflection in the mirror and identifies itself with it. This self-image dictates the efforts of the subject towards wholeness and autonomy. Thus, the newly formed specular “I” precedes the social “I”. The Symbolic takes place when the child starts to speak. It constitutes the system of symbolisation into which the child’s body must translate itself. The Symbolic marks the entrance into culture. It is at

this moment that the child sees itself as an autonomous being, that is, different from its mother. The social "I" appears and the child has to comply with social rules (Leitch 2001:1281).

Erich Neumann explains that this psychic evolution, like physical formation and maturation, is archetypal, in other words, it is directed by natural forces which are inherent to the human species. The first stage is dominated by the archetype of the mother: the child is "nature" and develops as nature. The next stage is ruled by the archetype of the father. In this stage, "an increasing importance is given to will, activity, learning, and values, and to integrating the child into the traditional cultural canon of its group [...]. This development is already underway in the 'matriarchal' phase, since [...] phases overlap" (1994:236). The child's urge to separate itself from the mother and mature out of this security is archetypal as well. It is a guiding force that lies within the child: "the archetype of wholeness, the Self" (1994:237-238).

Moreover, while the self disguises itself as the archetype of the phase the child is moving towards (the patriarchal), the previous archetype (the matriarchal) turns negative. Not only does it become everything that must be overcome ("the lower, infantile and archaic"), but also "the abysmal and chaotic," "the devouring feminine 'Dragon of the Abyss'" that leads to "stagnation, regression and death." Paradoxically, although these attributes do not involve action, this negative mother is active because she is an attractive force that pushes the individual downwards (Neumann 1994:241).

Julia Kristeva defines the abject as the "rejection of the gross materiality of the (m)other" as the subject enters the Symbolic order (in Williams 1995:35). Thus, abjection is the process whereby an individual must distinguish itself from the (m)other by repressing or casting out everything that culture considers to be dirty, improper or unacceptable. The abject comprises all the aspects that must be excluded on account of the threat it poses to the correct construction of the self.

Abjection is a potential source of horror. It is important to bear in mind that the terms terror and horror are not the same. Ann Radcliffe asserted in her essay *On the Supernatural in Poetry* (1826) that "the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them" (in Williams 1995:73). Hence, terror is associated with

the mind, the soul and the sublime<sup>1</sup>, while horror is associated with the body and physical responses. Both concepts are related to the formation of the self and its preservation, but in different ways:

Anything that threatens our existence is capable of evoking terror and hence the sublime. But in contrast to “abjection,” a process buried in the archaic processes of the not-yet-self, the sublime is a function of consciousness. Unlike horror, which threatens corporeal integrity –one’s being as a body– the sublime overwhelms the self with the *idea* of an overwhelming power. (Williams 1995:76. Original emphasis)

Therefore, it can be said that mothers are horrible because they evoke horror, and fathers are terrible because they evoke terror (1995:77).

In her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Kristeva analyses how abjection, as a source of horror, works in patriarchal societies as a means of detaching the human from the non-human, that is, the fully from the partially formed subject. According to her, the abject does not respect borders, positions or regulations, and consequently stirs and threatens “identity, system and order” (1982:4). She stresses the figure of the (m)other, who comes to represent the Imaginary, as the primary generator of abjection because she is rejected by the child in favour of the father, who epitomises the Symbolic. As a result, “the abject is placed on the side of the feminine: it exists in opposition to the paternal symbolic, which is governed by rules and laws” (Creed 1994:37).

Hoffman Baruch describes the abject as: “something that disgusts you, [...] an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may threaten us from the inside” (in Cavallaro 2002:199). For Kristeva, the most usual objects that cause repugnance are filth, waste, dung or food that, for whatever reason, provokes nausea. The body also holds or produces abject substances: urine, faeces, spittle, sweat, blood, pus, tears, semen, milk, etc. These substances put our integrity to the test because they are neither external nor internal, they fluctuate in between both realms. Moreover, they make it clear that the abject does not only come from the outside, but also from the inside. For this reason, the orifices of the body are our most vulnerable points. The key manifestation of the abject is the corpse: “If dung signifies the other side of the border, [...] the corpse, the most

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<sup>1</sup> As is well known, the sublime is understood by Edward Burke and most Romantics as that force that enhances one’s own faculties by making you feel smaller and thus aware of your weakness as a mere human being in the face of almighty nature.

sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel. 'I' is expelled" (Kristeva 1982:3-4). As a result, the corpse does not only cause anxiety because it stands for death, but also because it reminds us of our inevitable fate. It is the final stage of the physical evolution that the body experiences in life, that is, the culmination of our corruption and decay. Furthermore, the fact that the body produces polluting substances which must be abjected in order to survive means that we are permanently in danger of being infected by death in life (1982:3-4).

The ambiguity of abjection should also be taken into consideration. To begin with, abjection can be a significant source of enlightenment. Everything that threatens life also contributes to shaping it. Consequently, the abject is essential for individuals to take up their proper position in society, to better understand themselves and the world:

By communing with the fearful and the abject, rather than devoting ourselves to their annihilation, we may develop unexpectedly capacious sensibilities, insofar as their persistent evocation of paradoxical affects is likely to expand the territories of both our vigilant consciousness and our dormant unconscious fantasies. (Cavallaro 2002:206)

In addition, abjection brings about contradictory feelings: fear and attraction. It is impossible to break away from the abject. Despite its horrible nature, it will always be there, tempting us. Individuals are constructed through language, "through a desire for meaning." At the same time, they are seduced by the abject, "the place of meaninglessness," but this attraction must be shed for survival, "for fear of self-annihilation" (Creed 1994:10). For this reason, abject images like blood, excrement, vomit, etc, can inspire both disgust and elation. The former because they are culturally constructed as an enemy able "to engulf and disintegrate our identities and our boundaries" (Cavallaro 2002:201). The latter because they represent the return to a time when mother and child were together in a safe and wonderful fusion, when those substances were not embarrassing and repulsive. Finally, the breaking of taboos and social conventions, which this attraction might involve, can also become a source of pleasure.

The female body has traditionally been imagined as the main expression of the abject, owing to its subversion of universal aesthetic ideals which, in a phallogocentric world, take the male body as the standard. In contrast to a man's, a woman's body is "fluid, sprawling and leaky." Thus, it is seen as lacking a fixed shape, wholeness and clear boundaries from nature (Cavallaro 2002:204). Woman's mutability is most visible during pregnancy:

The womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination –blood, afterbirth, faeces. [...It] is viewed as horrifying [...] because of its essential functions –it houses an alien life form, it causes alterations in the body, it leads to the act of birth. The womb is horrifying *per se* and within patriarchal discourses it has been used to represent woman's body as marked, impure and a part of the natural/animal world. (Creed 1994:49)

This explains why this interpretation of the female reproductive functions caused the founders of the Church to be horrified at the idea that man was born of woman. Besides, Kristeva goes on to argue that in the Bible the image of the birthing woman as unclean is very often equalled to images of impurity and decay (1994:47).

Mothers are ambiguous in a non-psychological level as well. They are nurturing beings because they provide the child with food, shelter and protection. However, they can conversely turn deadly because they have the power to cut off those vital supplies. This, together with the mother's interference in the normal formation of the child's psyche, help to partly explain the double nature that patriarchy has ascribed to women in general, "an attitude which is also represented in the various stereotypes of feminine evil that exist within a range of popular discourses" (Creed 1994:164). It must also be noted that, even when the mother may pay all the necessary attention to her child, she may not succeed in protecting it. The mother is also a human being, to quote Neumann's words, "an integral part of her group, her times, and her destiny" (1994:234). Therefore, if she experiences anxiety due to illness, war, hunger, or any other reasons, she may transfer that anxiety onto her child. She may also be unable to protect her child from factors such as fate, the child's own physical constitution, etc. In all these cases, although the mother is blameless, from an archetypal perspective, she is guilty and condemned.

## MOTHERHOOD IN *JACK MAGGS*

Images and scenes that evoke the abject are constant in *Jack Maggs*. First of all, there are corpses (human and animal) and abortions. In this significant excerpt, Jack is led to where his dead child has been dropped after Ma has performed an abortion on Sophina:

[Tom] did take me down through the house, [...] towards the privy and the thistles to the brick wall, then [...] up and over a collapsing drain [...]. And here the smell was very bad –all kinds of excrement and rottenness. Here Tom forced me to stoop and kneel beside the little drain as it pushed its way under the cheese shop. He kept me pinned [...] and all the while he poked into the filth with a stick. [...] There lay our son –the poor dead mite was such a tiny thing. I could have held him in my hand. And on his queerly familiar little face, a cruel and dreadful cut. (262-263)

There are also plenty of references to blood, the innards of bodies and the consumption of meat: “It’s the meat he [Jack]’ll be needing, she [Ma] said. Neck, scrag end, belly—that’s what’s missing” (85); “Tobias ate roast beef pooled in blood. It was very tasty” (149); “By 1806 we [Jack and his adoptive family] ate best brisket, chump chops, rolled roast beef from the butcher’s shop in Upper Street” (227). Scenes describing other revulsive materials or situations are also frequent: when Tobias’s child is being operated on, “as the blade came down across the swelling on the red protrusion, [...] the great river of pus flowed forth from the lanced boil” (206); [Tobias] “sat hunched over [...] remembering the horrid sound of the blood bubbling from Wilfred Partridge’s throat” (288); “These clothes were so filthy, they stuck to me like they were made from treacle and smelt so foul you would think I had been rolling in the river mud” (104); “the prisoner’s [Jack’s] smell –the odour of cold sour sweat” (310).

The abject is presented, above all, in the shape of maternity. All the female characters in the story become mothers at one time or another. All of these mothers, with the exception of Mercy, are closely related to death. Firstly, because some of them die in the end, such as Sophina and Lizzie. But secondly, and most relevant to my analysis, because whatever their actions or true intentions may be, they kill or nearly kill their babies or others’, being thus depicted as negligent and dangerous, as a stereotypical source of horror. Abortion, including the bloody description of the process and its hideous result, plays an essential role in the presentation of these mothers as life-usurpers, as will be shown.

The most lethal mother in the novel is Ma Britten, Jack’s adoptive mother. She is the vivid example of the horrible mother, which can be seen in her physical description and her actions. She reminds us of the mythical figure of the witch. She is even described as such: “a big-boned woman with wild red hair” (84), “a force of nature [...] her long arms, her wild hair, her hair always smelling of snakeroot and tansy” (102). As a maternal figure, she is ambiguous because she earns money as a midwife (a life-giver), but also as an abortionist

(a life-taker). In the Middle Ages, those times when the belief in witches was strongest, midwives were suspected of witchcraft. They were thought to use their supernatural powers to do their job, and if something went wrong, it only proved their evil side (Williams 1992:11). Ma prepares her medicine by mixing herbs or parts of animals in a pot, as witches usually do when preparing their magical potions:

Some [organs of animals] she selected for soup, some were sold, and others she mixed with tansy, savin, snakeroot, to make her “Belly-ache” sausages which she hung from the ceiling and for which women paid her a tanner. [...She] turned back to the stove. As she lifted the lid, the snout of a pig rose slowly to the edge of the battered old black pot. (104)

Her fondness for meat emphasises her castrating nature. It is a popular belief that witches like eating children, so her preference for meat as food can be equalled to her act of devouring (or aborting) babies:

She had such a belief in the virtues of meat, the Ma. Had you seen her on market days, coming home from Smithfield with her lads pale and close around her great grey skirts, you might not have guessed how we regarded that bounty on her back. It was our future she saw in those stolen scraps. It was lack of meat she believed made all of those children in Pepper Alley so slow and listless. (102-103)

She even looks younger (7), a fact that can be connected to traditional folklore, where witches usually recover their youth by consuming young flesh or blood. It is interesting to point out that Ma’s house is presented as if it were a sort of butcher or slaughterhouse. First of all, its inhabitants are often handling meat, which is later used for food or to prepare Ma’s special medicine for women. Even Jack once describes himself as a “slaughterman”:

By six I could wash and sort the bones and offal, [...] a gruesome sight to your gentle eyes I’m sure –but it was nothing for me to arrange the innards in the way she found them most useful, and I fancy I had the knowledge of a slaughterman when it came to identifying the otherworldly shapes and colours of the organs of dead beasts. (103-104)

Furthermore, Ma performs abortions in the house. This is Jack’s descriptive account of his daily housekeeping:

We might here find blood in quantities enough to frighten any child, and discover things in muslin-covered basins that haunt me to this day. We [...] emptied the contents of the basins into the cess pit at the back of the garden. We cleaned the plain room with soap and scrubbing brush, quickly, holding our breath. (230)



There is another fact that enhances Ma Britain's role as a kind of witch. She is related to the occult, although in a rather subtle way. It is known that a woman with a similar name existed at that time: Emma Hardinge Britten (1823-1899), who was a well-known medium, and very active in the spiritualist movement. She also wrote several works on the subject (see <http://www.fst.org/hardinge.htm>).

It is in Ma Britten's job as an abortionist that her castrating power can most clearly be apprehended. Although it is the biological mother who usually seeks Ma's assistance to abort, it is finally she who performs the action. In addition, Ma mistreats her own children, especially the adopted ones. She uses them to get money, and thus she trains them to be criminals. She keeps Jack and Sophina locked up, and charges them with the care and cleaning of the house. As Jack relates: "It is not so queer then that we looked forward to our burglary more than we feared its consequences. It was not our blood-line, or our criminal craniums, but our natural human desire for something other than the tedium of close confinement" (232).

A representative instance of Ma Britten's deadly power can be seen in Sophina and Lizzie's abortions. Sophina is Jack's girlfriend when he lives with Ma Britten. She gets pregnant, but she does not manage to keep her baby alive as Ma selfishly forces her to abort: "Ma [...] was more concerned with business than our morals. She did not wish to lose her little girl-thief to motherhood, or me to Sophina. She needed both as servants to her cause" (261). Sophina is not allowed to be a mother, since Ma decides on her fate. The novel does not offer a description of her abortion, but the repulsive result is perceived through Jack's eyes since his unborn child has been thrown away in a cess pit and is mockingly compared to a toad by Tom, his step-brother and Ma's biological son (263). Lizzie's baby's fate is also linked to Ma, though indirectly. Lizzie is Tobias's lover. When she gets pregnant, she plans to escape to France to give birth. On her return, she would pretend she had adopted a baby while being abroad (240-241). Nevertheless, she is not strong enough to carry out her plan, and accepts the abortive pills Tobias gives her, unaware of the fact that she has already taken that medicine in her sister's tea. Her sister (Mary Oates, who is also Tobias's wife) gets that medicine from Ma Britten. This is how their meeting is described, using the squashing of caterpillars as a metaphor for Ma's job: "Mary Oates held out the frayed little advertisement. Mrs Britten took it from her, and Mary, seeing how the fierce old lady held it between thumb and forefinger, was reminded of the way in which her grandfather had squashed caterpillars in his garden" (314).

Lizzie and Sophina are portrayed as incompetent mothers, but they are victims as well. Although they wish to keep their babies, they are pushed to get rid of them. Moreover, both die in the novel. Lizzie is constantly infantilised, and sometimes she is literally called “child” (214), which points to her assumed incompetence as a proper mother. Her abortion is depicted as bloody and extremely painful, her dead body showing “tension, angularity, distress. She lay in the midst of the rucked and tangled carmine sheets, her hand thrust into her mouth as if she were still biting it” (353). Her baby does not end up in a cess pit like Sophina’s, but in the fireplace with the bloody sheets: “[Tobias] saw the wraith of their dead child folding and unfolding in the skirts of fire. He saw Lizzie herself, her face smiling and folding into the horrible figure of decay” (354). Even if Lizzie had rejected Tobias’s pills, she would not have been able to save her baby as her sister poisons her secretly. However, she might have saved her life, because the double dose makes her suffer such an awful death while aborting (353). Sophina dies much later in a different situation. She is hanged at the gallows because Tom, her step-brother and now husband, betrays her and she is caught red-handed while burgling (304).

Other irresponsible mothers are Marjorie Larkin (Mercy’s mother) and Mary Oates. When her husband dies, Marjorie starts neglecting her daughter: “she had nothing but silence to answer the questions of her weeping daughter. [...] During the day, Mercy was imprisoned in their steamy little room [...]. Her mother would not say where she went or what she did or how much money she had” (75). Later on, she pushes Mercy to prostitution until she is rescued by Buckle (76-77). As for Mary Oates, apart from being sometimes portrayed as a bad mother (256), she cannot prevent her baby from getting seriously ill. Besides, she contributes to her little sister’s death when she gives her a cup of poisonous tea to make her abort (329). Lizzie is not her daughter, but she is under her protection since she lives with her and her husband. In addition, if Mary, like her sister, had been more honest, she might have avoided such a horrible end.

The negative description of these mothers, who are all British, can also be read as a piece of criticism against Britain’s refusal or inability to look after its own people. In other words, these mothers can be said to represent the fatal relationship between the mother land and its children, no matter if they live in Britain itself or in the colonies. This type of reading also evokes the universal idea of the land as feminine. The earth has usually been imagined as a mother, which means that the ambivalence applied to mothers in patriarchal societies is also applied to the land. Mother Earth rules over all kinds of life. Her womb brings forth all living things (animals, plants and humans), and their fates are

subject to her will since she masters nature: the weather, crops, etc. That is why, in her evil power as bad mother, she can swallow back into “her womb of death” everything that was born (Neumann 1994:188-189).

As her name phonetically suggests, Ma Britten is the female character who most clearly symbolises Mother Britain and the pain this country is able to inflict upon its people. She is identified with Britain in many ways. Even she is once called “the Queen of England” by Jack (102). To give an example, she is presented at one point as a soldier wielding a sword and exercising her castrating power upon others:

She carried a great military sword, disguised from official eyes with old newspaper and hat ribbon, and more than once she drew it. One summer's evening on London Bridge itself, she cut a slice down a young man's arm so you could see the shining blue white of bone from his elbow to his wrist. (103)

Similarly, the description of the punishment she inflicts upon Jack when he is discovered sleeping with Sophina inevitably brings to mind the harsh punishments endured by convicts in Australia at the hands of British soldiers:

Once she had me on the ladder, she hitched her skirts up in a style that revealed her white and muscled calves. She then retreated into the kitchen from whence she presently came running, and laid the strop down hard on me with an ugly grunt. Twenty times she did this, and though she were huffing and puffing at the end of it, there was not a stroke where she did not admonish Sophina to keep her eyes upon my humiliation, and to take her hands off her ears so she might hear my cowardly cries. (261)

Thus, Britten/Britain proves to be a cruel mother who can lead to the annihilation of her offspring if they do not live up to her expectations and satisfy her demands. It is from this (post)colonial perspective that the implications of the constant repulsive descriptions of Ma's profession and actions can be best appreciated. They work as a metaphor for Mother Britain getting rid of her unwanted citizens (or children), such as the convicts transported to Australia.

The only positive mother in *Jack Maggs* is Mercy, the true heroine of the novel. There are several reasons for her heroic presentation. To begin with, she is the only character who supports and shows “mercy” towards Jack. She saves him physically and mentally. Physically, when her left hand stops the bullet shot by Henry. At that moment she is even described as an angel: “as if she were in truth a spirit, a force of nature equal but opposite to the malevolent

being who now threatened to snuff out Jack Maggs's life" (352). Mentally, when she teaches him where he really belongs.

Jack is an ex-convict who was sent to Australia. As a consequence, he shows the problems of identity usually derived from displacement. His identity lies in uncertain ground, half-way between Britain and Australia. For most of the novel, he believes himself to be an Englishman. He still has not formed a stable identity in Australia: "I am not of that race. [...] The Australian race." (340). Alan Lawson asks the question "Who am I when I am transported?" and asserts that this problem was common to those people who were transported since the new environment "did little to foster any sense of continuity, where the sense of distance, both within and without, was so great that a new definition of self –metaphysical, historical, cultural, linguistic and social– was needed" (1995:169).

Jack is obsessed with going back to Britain because, apart from this being the place where he was born, he has suffered terrible tortures in Australia. He manages to endure this ordeal by re-imagining a wonderful England. The next excerpt clearly displays Australia as hell, in comparison to the English heaven of Jack's imagination:

the wretched man would begin to build London in his mind. He would build it brick by brick as the horrid double-cat smote the air, eddying forth like a storm from Hell itself. Underneath the scalding sun, which burned his flesh as soon as it was mangled, Jack Maggs would imagine the long mellow light of English summer. (350)

His traumatic experience as a convict prevents him from seeing the truth. Ironically, Australia, the remote land where he was imprisoned, offers him a chance for freedom, for a happy and prosperous life that England has constantly denied him. In England he has been confined since early childhood. He was adopted by Ma Britten and forced to be a burglar. His stepmother shut him and Sophina up and only allowed them to go out in order to break into houses and steal. Jack's blindness leads him to despise his two Australian sons. When he is given a conditional pardon and a piece of land to start a new life, he becomes a brickmaker and makes a fortune, which he invests in an adopted English son, a little boy who fed him when he was just about to be transported (286-287). Jack returns to England in order to search for him, at the risk of being arrested or even executed for breaking the conditions of his deportation. He desires to turn this boy into an English gentleman, the same English gentleman he himself always longed to be. As J. O. Jordan suggests: "Rejected by England, he compensates by creating an English gentleman whose love and gratitude he

hopes will heal that earlier wound” (2000:298). Jack’s idealisation of England and his obsession with his English son can also be considered to be a kind of mental imprisonment. He is not free until he wakes up from his fantasies by confronting England face to face:

It is significant that Jack is constantly constrained by fear and the threat of betrayal in England, whereas he is free, socially acceptable and prosperous in Australia. His return to the social order which made him a criminal, which he has romanticised from afar, enables him to recognise the freedom offered by the social order of his former prison, which has itself begun to metamorphose from a penal colony into a site of liberation. (Hassal 1997:134)

He also counts on Mercy’s help. She makes him aware that his place is in Australia, with his real children, not in England with a fake son: ““You left them alone? [...] You were their da, but you had an aim to find a better class of son. [...] And while these little boys wait for you to come home, you prance round England trying to find someone who does not love you at all”” (346-347).

Furthermore, Mercy flees to Australia with Jack after Henry tries to kill him. Hence, she becomes Australian and mother of some “members of ‘That Race’” (356). She raises Jack’s children and gives birth to five more. She can also be regarded as a mother on a historical level. Jack writes a collection of letters to Henry because he does not want him to hear his story distorted by other sources, like Tobias, an English writer who wants to use Jack to write the novel that will make him famous: *The Death of Maggs*. By keeping Jack’s letters after his death, Mercy symbolically becomes a protecting mother of Australian history. This is why people remember her best:

it is Mercy who is now remembered best, not only for the story of how she lost her wedding finger, [...] but also for the very particular library she collected in her middle age [...] she owned no fewer than seven copies of the last edition [*The Death of Maggs*], and each of these is now (together with Jack Maggs’s letters to Henry Phipps) in the collection of the Mitchell Library in Sydney. (356-357)

By preserving Jack’s letters, the non-official version of “his-story,” she counters the official one (Tobias’s book), and thus gives voice to the thus far silenced and marginalised colonies.

## CONCLUSION

*Jack Maggs* is a novel where motherhood plays an important role. The book stresses the double nature universally attributed to mothers. Mothers can be both nurturing and murderous, the latter being the characteristic which is mostly emphasised in the story. Accordingly, the book clearly displays how motherhood can be connected to the abject, and the feelings of horror that it can arouse. In a broader sense, this horrible view of maternity can be understood as a piece of criticism against the castrating power of “Mother Britain” over its people and colonies. The character of Ma Britten perfectly illustrates this idea. Significantly enough, Mercy, the only positive mother, becomes Australian in the end. She turns out to be the actual heroine of the story since she both helps Jack to accept himself as an Australian and enables his marginalised voice to be heard in opposition to the British dominant discourse.

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