
The Power, Symbolism, and Extension of the Mother In *L'enfant Noir*: A Feminine Portrait By a Masculine Author

Deborah Weigel
University of New Mexico

In the lives of most children are influential adults or parents. In the case of Camara Laye in *L'enfant noir*, the mother is most significant in the training of her son. Although the father is also important, the mother plays a specific role as a nurturer and protector in his life.¹ The poem at the beginning of the text is a strong testament to the close relationship he had with his mother, and it also pays homage to mothers in general.² It honors the woman who nursed him, oversaw his first steps, opened his eyes to the beauties of the world, dried his tears, and who was patient at times when he was mischievous. In addition, the book is a monument to extensions of the mother (the grandmother, the aunt, and the guardian), who also function as nurturers.

However, the autobiography lacks a penetration into the inner lives of the feminine characters. In this narrative by a masculine author, writing from the point of view of a young boy, we are not presented with the interior world of the women. We do not read of the private triumphs, the intimate frustrations and difficulties, the dreams and unspeakable fantasies, or of the complex relations of the females. Although archetypes and symbols emphasize a feminine presence, they are not sufficient to describe or psychoanalyze the sentiments and emotions of the women. Numerous questions can be posed in regard to this theme. For example, is it possible for a male author to write with authority and comprehension about a feminine character? What are his qualifications? He has a mother, but does this make him an expert on mothers? Does he do justice to the feminine characters in the text? Does he depend on archetypes and universal feminine symbols to depict women? Despite the power, symbolism, and extension of the mother in the text, we also see the limitations of male authorship in presenting this particular feminine portrait.

What sort of woman is the mother of Camara Laye? She is black, African, and comes from a family of blacksmiths. She is a woman of resignation and has a strong sense of right and wrong. She is not always patient but is compassionate. For example, when apprentices came to live with the family, she was more kind to them than to her own children because she realized they were away from their own families. She also possessed a certain authority in the home, and commanded respect. During meals, although the father presided, the mother's presence was felt and "everything was done according to her own rules; and those rules were strict" (Laye 68).

In theory, in a patriarchal society, the father presides, but in reality, in this family, the mother had strong authority. Laye says of her influence that

I realize that my mother's authoritarian attitudes may appear surprising; generally the role of the African woman is thought to be a ridiculously humble one, and indeed there are parts of the continent where it is insignificant; but Africa is vast, with a diversity equal to its vastness. (69)

He says that in their home there was a certain pride and independence among the women, and they didn't bully others, and others didn't bully them. Thus in this instance, the mother is respected and her matriarchal presence is powerful. Her opinions, her rules, and her ways carry weight, and life in the home is structured and based to some degree on her leadership. As Laye explains, this is not the case in every African family.

Furthermore, she is admired for her mysterious powers. Laye says that his father "had the greatest respect for her too, and so did our friends and neighbors" (69). He writes that her powers seem unbelievable, but he saw her exercise them with his own eyes. For example, one day a horse was lying out in the pasture and refused to follow its owner to the gate. Some people went to get his mother to help out with the situation. When she arrived, the owner was striking the horse, trying to get it to obey. She told the man not to strike the animal, explaining that it would not do any good. She went up to the horse, lifted her hand, and declared:

If it is true that from the day of my birth I had knowledge of no man until the day of my marriage: and if it is true that from the day of my marriage I have had knowledge of no man other than my lawful husband—if these things be true, then I command you, horse, rise up! (70-71)

Laye says that all the observers saw the horse get up and immediately follow his master. He realizes that the story may be difficult to believe, but emphasizes that he witnessed the scene himself. His mother, by the way, is also virtuous.

Laye discusses the source of his mother's powers. According to tradition, since she was born after twin brothers, she was endowed with certain abilities and su-

pernatural gifts. Although the twin boys are considered to have above average capacity and are somewhat set apart from others, the child that follows the twins plays an even more important role. Thus, his mother is revered almost as a sorceress, and is expected to be even more talented than her brothers, and to assume heavier responsibilities.

Certain mysterious qualities are often associated with mothers in general. Jung, in *Aspects of the Feminine*, describes the archetype of the mother, saying that sympathy, solicitude, magic authority, wisdom and spiritual insight that transcend reason, helpful instincts or impulses, and “all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility,” represent the mother (110). The *Dictionary of Symbolism* states that the mother is associated with the following:

... wisdom beyond knowledge, benevolence, sheltering, sustaining; the giving of fertility, growth, nourishment; the locus of magical transformation and rebirth; all that is secret and hidden. (Biedermann 227-28)

So, Laye's mother possesses qualities and powers that are considered feminine and maternal, but she seems to be particularly gifted, and she is respected in her own culture for her abilities.

Laye describes other powers of his mother as being “strange” and “mysterious” (72). She has dreams and revelations during the night while she sleeps, and is able to forewarn others of possible problems or difficulties. In some cases, she is able to help people prepare for certain challenges because she knows in advance that they are coming. Thus, people are careful not to disturb her during her sleep because they don't want to interrupt the unraveling of the revelations. So, she is not only authoritative and powerful, but she is also highly intuitive in a way that seems almost supernatural.

She also inherited from her father the totem of a crocodile. Laye explains that “this totem allowed all Damans to draw water from the Niger without running any danger of harm” (74). He speaks of a time when the river was three times its usual size, and the crocodiles were abundant. The people of the community stayed away from the river for fear of the dangerous animals, but his mother calmly went to draw water without fear. He writes:

I had every reason to fear those voracious beasts; but my mother could draw water without fear, and no one warned her of the danger, because everyone knew that the danger did not exist for her [T]he crocodiles could do no harm to my mother; and this privilege is quite understandable: the totem is identified with its possessor: this identification is absolute, and of such a nature that its possessor has the power to take on the form of the totem itself; it follows quite obviously that the totem can not devour itself. (74-75)

Jung, in *Man and his Symbols*, speaks of the totem and of its importance in certain societies. He says some people believe that a man has a bush soul in addition to his own, and that this bush soul is “incarnate in a wild animal or a tree, with which the human individual has some kind of psychic identity” (24). The bush soul exists in a variety of forms, such as that of an animal, and is considered to be like a brother to the man. Jung explains that a “man whose brother is a crocodile, for instance, is supposed to be safe when swimming a crocodile-infested river” (24). Laye’s mother, in inheriting this totem, feels safe to draw water from the Niger River, even when it is filled with crocodiles.

In an interview with Camara Laye, Jaqueline Leiner asked the question, “Quand vous affirmez que la mère va au fleuve, et qu’elle n’est pas mangée par les crocodiles. Parce que son totem est le crocodile ... Vous y croyez?” [When you assert that your mother goes to the river, and that she is not eaten by crocodiles because her totem is a crocodile, do you believe that?] (162). He replied:

Ouais! Il faut voir ça, avec les yeux d’un enfant. Moi, j’ai quitté ma famille quand j’avais quatorze ans. On m’a envoyé au collège, à Conakry, donc, jusqu’à quatorze ans, j’ai cru à cela, et comme le livre s’appelle *L’enfant noir*, c’est l’enfant noir qui parle et non l’homme. Je suis obligé de parler comme l’enfant ... absolument. (162-163)

[Yes! It must be seen that way, with the eyes of a child. I left my family when I was fourteen years old. I was sent to college in Conakry. So up to the age of fourteen, I believed this, and as the book is called *The Dark Child*, it is the child that speaks and not the man. I am obligated to speak as a child ... absolutely.]

Laye explains that he speaks from the point of view of a child and not that of a man. As a child he believed in his mother’s extraordinary abilities and powers, including her capability to draw water from the river without fear of the crocodiles.

However, the male author, writing from the perspective of a young boy, does not really write about this female character, his mother, with comprehension. He does not describe her interior life. Is she tired? Does she ever feel lonely even though she lives among other people? Does she ever feel poorly, or is she in an emotionally delicate state because she has her period, or will soon have her period? Does she secretly admire a man who is not her husband? Are her polygamous relationships complex? Does she have dreams or fantasies that she does not dare express? Although he has a mother, Laye does not really have the necessary qualifications to write with authority of his mother and her inner sentiments. For the most part, he describes her exterior life.

In *L'enfant noir*, Laye utilizes feminine symbols such the earth and the water to emphasize a maternal presence. In a way, he depends on them to pay homage to the women in the text. These symbols are universal, and they are found in both African and Western cultures. For example, Phanuel Akubueze Egejuru, in the book *Nwanyibu: Womanbeing and African Literature*, presents a song that “attempts to capture the female principle and the signifying role of womanbeing among the Igbo of Nigeria” (11).

NWANYIBUIFEN

wanyibuife	Woman is something
Gini bu ife?	What is something?
Ife bu Ala	Something is Earth
Ife bu Mmiri	Something is Water
Ife bu Ekwu	Something is Hearth
Ife bu Nri	Something is Nourishment
Ife bu Udo	Something is Peace
Ife bu Nkwado	Something is Support/Prop
Ife bu Nkwudo	Something is Stability
Ife bu Uba	Something is Wealth
Ife bu Oganihu	Something is Progress
Ife bu Omumu	Something is Reproduction
Ife bu Ozuzu	Something is Completion
Ife bu Nne	Something is Mother
Gini bu Nne?	What is Mother?
Nne bu ndu	Mother is Life
Nne bu Ozuzu	Mother is Rearing
Nne bu Ihunanya	Mother is Love
Nne bu Chi	Mother is
ChiNne KA!	MOTHER IS SUPREME! (11)

Although the poem refers specifically to the Igbo women of Nigeria, one could say that the ideas are applicable to mothers throughout the world.

Furthermore, Malidoma Patrice Somé, in *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, writes of the earth as a feminine symbol. He says that the earth represents “home, nourishment, support, comfort, and empowerment, . . . survival and healing, unconditional love and caring” and that the earth “loves to give and gives love abundantly” (173). He describes the earth as a fertile womb that produces plants and trees, and this vegetation helps us to understand the mother. He explains that the earth is our mother, and states, “Born out of her continuously fertile womb, the plants and trees are proud to show us what the natural juice of our mother tastes like and how invigorating and empowering it is to rely on what she gives” (265).

Although the earth as a feminine symbol is powerful in African society, it is also significant in Western culture. Aeschylus, the Greek playwright wrote: "Hail to thee, Earth, mother of humanity, may you grow in God's embrace, and be filled with fruit, for the use of your children" (Biederman 111). The earth produces the nourishment that sustains human life. Man labors in the field, plants the seeds, and in turn, the earth furnishes the fruit. The plow is a masculine symbol which is associated with the earth. According to the *Dictionary of Symbolism*, "In ancient agricultural societies the plowing of "MOTHER EARTH" was likened to a phallic sexual act" (269). Simone de Beauvoir discusses this symbolism in her book, *The Second Sex*. She writes of the woman:

She is the earth, and man the seed. . . . [T]he sod broken by the plowman's labor passively receives the seeds within its furrows. But it plays a necessary part: it supports the living germ, protects it and furnishes the substance for its growth. (144)

So when the harvest is ripe, man reaps nourishment from Mother Earth.

The symbolism of the earth is important in chapter four of *L'enfant noir*, during the rice harvest at Tindican. Laye describes his mother as a "woman of the fields," and it is in Tindican, the village where she grew up and where her family still lives, that an annual harvest takes place. He describes in detail the activities of this event, which are masculine in nature.

[T]he men lined up at the edge, naked to the loins, their sickles ready. . . . Immediately, the black torsos would bend over the great golden field, and the sickles begin to cut. Now it was not only the morning breeze which made the field tremble, but also the men working. (57)

So the men work with the earth, the female, and they impregnate it with seed. The earth then nurtures the seed, which grows and develops until it is ripe, and then the men reap the harvest.

In the essay "La mission de la femme africaine" ["The Mission of the African Woman"], Sastre writes: "La maternité n'est pas uniquement physique, elle est aussi et peut-être surtout spirituelle" [Maternity is not just physical, it is also and perhaps more importantly spiritual] (19-20). The impregnation of the earth, the incubation period, and the harvest are also, in a sense, spiritual events. The men are unified in the same work and they sing the same chant. Laye explains: "Singing in chorus, they reaped, voices and gestures in harmony. They were together!—united by the same task, the same song. It was as if the same soul bound them" (61). So, the harvest unifies the people of the community both physically and spiritually, and the earth serves as a prominent maternal symbol in this event.

Water is also an important feminine symbol in African society and in the Occidental world. Camara Laye refers to this symbol in his text, and Egejuru states that water “is another powerful element symbolized as female” (13). Furthermore, Somé discusses how water “can claim us as her children. We can say that we come from Earth, but Earth didn’t exist until water showed up, so water can lay claim to anything that is alive” (171). In the *Dictionary of Symbolism*, Biedermann writes: “In many myths of the creation of the world, water is the primordial fluid from which all life comes” (372). Évelyne Wilwerth explains that, “Les femmes, plus que les hommes, vivent intimement le liquide. Sang menstruel, eaux du placenta, lait maternel, etc.” [Women, more than men, live intimately with liquids: menstrual blood, water from the placenta, maternal milk, etc.] (ix). Furthermore, Gaston Bachelard, in his text on water and dreams, includes a chapter titled, “Maternal Water and Feminine Water.” He asserts that water represents the maternal milk and the irreplaceable mother. In his poem, Laye describes his mother as a “woman of the rivers.” The water represents the vital fluids of the mother, who is the nurturer of life.

Through these universal feminine archetypes and symbols Camara Laye is able to recount and idealize pleasant memories from his childhood. In his interview with Leiner, in comparing his life in Paris as an adult with his upbringing in Africa, he said: “Alors, comme c’est beau cette vie là-bas dans toute cette misère d’ici! On la retrouve plus facilement, on la retrouve sans hésiter” [Oh, how much more wonderful life was down there compared to the misery here. I think of my life there easily, and I remember it without hesitation] (163). His memories and his narration reflect a sense of well-being and happiness, and he idealizes the feminine characters. However, in so doing, he fails to delve into their interior emotional state. He does not really speak of the inner challenges and difficulties in the lives of the women. He is generous in his homage to them, but he does not do justice by failing to reveal intimate sentiments.

The mother of Camara Laye, according to the text, is a woman of the home, of the earth, of the water, and she is also a protector. At the beginning of the book, he describes the voices of his parents in the workshop. He says that they are reassuring and tranquil. In the first paragraph of the text, it is made known that the young child lives in a secure environment. Both the mother and the father as a couple help to furnish this sense of well-being for their son. However, the mother plays a strong role as a protector of her child. For example, when he was playing with a dangerous snake, his mother was the one to teach him to be more careful. Laye writes of the incident:

Around me there was a great commotion. My mother was shouting hardest of all, and she gave me a few sharp slaps. I wept, more upset by the sudden uproar than by the blows. A little later, when I was somewhat calmer and the shouting had ceased, my mother solemnly warned me never to play that game again. I promised, although the game still didn't seem dangerous to me. (18)

It is his mother who made him promise that he would not play with the dangerous snake. In an essay on the mother in the literature of Guinea, Mali, and Senegal, Alphamoye Sonfo writes: "La mère procure la joie et la consolation. Elle est le refuge et la protectrice de l'enfant" [The mother procures joy and consolation. She is the refuge and the protector of the child] (96). His mother is the person who teaches him the difference between a dangerous snake and the good snake. She explains:

"My son, this one must not be killed: he is not like other snakes, and he will not harm you; you must never interfere with him ..."

"This snake," my mother added, "is your father's guiding spirit...."

"Look," said my mother, "the snake is going to pay your father a visit." (22)

Furthermore, Laye lives with his mother in her hut. Fritz H. Pointer, in his article "Laye, Lamming, and Wright: Mother and Son," describes the hut as "warm" and "womb-like" (23). The younger brothers and sisters of Laye live with their paternal grandmother. He and the younger apprentices share a bed in the mother's hut. Laye writes: "I was the only one of her children who lived with her" (65). So he has a specific position in the family where his mother is able to have a strong influence on him, and where she can even look after him during the night. However, according to tradition, after he is circumcised as a teenager, he is considered a man, and will have a hut of his own.

The rite of circumcision is extremely important in the development of the male from Guinea. Patrick R. McNaughton, in his paper on Mande blacksmiths, states:

For the Mande, circumcision constitutes a physical and psychic journey into adulthood. An uncircumcised male would simply not be considered an adult. In conversations with smiths and young men, I was repeatedly told that uncircumcised boys could not get married or have sexual intercourse, nor could they enter the important *kòmò* initiation association or accept the responsibilities families and communities give adults. Furthermore, they would be incapable of acquiring knowledge crucial to their spiritual and intellectual development. Finally, while they remain uncircumcised, no matter how old they are, they are conceived of as boys and are not held responsible for their acts; they can carry out the most annoying of pranks and behave very nearly as they please. They are considered more animal than human, in the sense that the social refinements that begin with circumcision have not yet begun to civilize them. After the blacksmith circum-

cises them, however, this period of grace comes to an abrupt end. Boys become men and are expected to act accordingly in all situations. (67)

So, although circumcision is painful and difficult for the young man, it is quite necessary in Guinean society. The male is acknowledged as a man, and he will occupy his own hut. There is music among the Mande that celebrates the rite of circumcision: "Appelez les mères!" [Call the Mothers!] and "Chant des nouveaux circoncis" [Song of the Newly Circumcised] (Zemp #15 and #14).³

This rite is a time in which the son is eventually separated from the mother. Simone Vierne, in her book *Rite, Roman, Initiation*, speaks of the separation during rites of puberty:

cette séparation est bien plutôt un arrachement. Le jeune garçon, dans les rites de puberté, est séparé du monde féminin dans lequel il a vécu jusqu'alors. L'expulsion de la case, domaine de la femme, se fait sans douceur . . . , et les mères pleurent comme si la séparation allait être définitive, ce qui est tout à fait exact en un sens. (17-18)

[this separation is rather a pulling apart. The young boy, during the puberty rites, is separated from the feminine world in which he has lived up to this point. The expulsion from the hut, the domain of the woman, is done without tenderness, and the mothers cry as if the separation were to be definitive, which, in a sense is exactly what happens.]

An important transformation occurs between the mother and her son in that the invisible umbilical cord between the two of them is severed. Robert Philipson explains that the circumcision ritual is not only "a transition from childhood to adulthood, but from individual experience to social values, and, analogously, from women's influence to the men's" (179).

The separation is painful for both the mother and her male child. The third week after his circumcision, Laye was able to see his mother again. The love he had for his mother is evident in the passage where he talks about their reunion. He writes that he had never been separated from her for so long, and when he saw her he kept repeating the words, "Mother! Mother!" (130-131). Although there exists, after the circumcision, a distance between the mother and her son, she continues her role as a protector. She does not cease to love and protect her child. Laye says that when he returned to his concession, the whole family was waiting for him. His parents greeted him warmly, and hugged him tightly, especially his mother. He writes that it was as if "she secretly wanted to proclaim that I was still her son and that my second birth had done nothing to alter that fact" (134).

The night before Laye departs to Conakry, he seems to hear groaning, and he goes to the hut of his mother. He sees her stirring on the bed deeply moaning,

When he actually leaves, his mother begins to weep, and then he also starts to cry. Plus, each time he returns to Kouroussa, he finds his hut freshly painted with improvements that were the result of the work of his mother. Also, during the night when he is in his hut, his mother checks on him to make sure he is alone. Laye writes that he was old enough to take care of himself, and that he felt his privacy was invaded when people such as his mother peeked in on him throughout the day and night. People would say to him that it was a demonstration of his mother's love, but he hoped this affection could be "a little less jealous and tyrannical" (173).

The mother becomes a nuisance Laye loves her, but would like to more emphatically cut the invisible umbilical cord that seems to linger between the two of them. His mother exhibits a common fault found among many mothers: the tendency to hover over their children, and to want to remain too attached to them when they are adults. When Laye is given the opportunity to study in France, his mother responds: "To France? ... So you're going to leave us again.... You're not going!" (180). It is the father who intervenes and gives parental consent for him to accept the scholarship offered. In his essay, "Mères aimantes, mères dévorantes chez Camara Laye et chez Albert Memmi," Anny-Claire Jaccard says of the situation:

Les traits négatifs des mères sont d'une part liés à leur incapacité de s'adapter aux exigences des temps modernes et d'autre part leur comportement, inquiétant et irritant, est perçu et décrit dans l'optique d'un fils acculturé qui rejette le poids des traditions, représenté par la mère. (68)

[The negative traits of the mothers are, on one hand, associated with their inability to adapt to the demands of modern times, and on the other hand, their anxious and annoying behavior is perceived and described from the perspective of a son who has become cultured, and who rejects the burden of tradition represented by the mother.]

So, according to Jaccard, the mother of Laye struggles with the fact that her son is going to leave Africa, and in so doing will also leave behind her, the family, and tradition, and will go to an unknown, strange world.

Laye describes his mother as a protector who has strong emotions for her son. He understands that his mother loves him very much and that a maternal attachment exists between them. He sees his mother moan, weep, and suffer, when she knows she will be separated from her child. This is the closest the author comes to expressing the deeper sentiments of a feminine character. But the description is based on exterior events, and even here, the reader receives the point of view of a young boy. In a way, the perspective is narcissistic because it is he, the author, who is so deeply loved and missed.

Nevertheless, the mother, in general, is very important, and she has an enormous influence in Laye's life. Then, there are also other characters in the text who also represent the mother. In the book *Femmes d'Afrique Noire*, Monique Gessain expresses the following:

C'est par son rôle de mère que la femme ... assume son rôle essentiel. Le terme de mère nous semble d'ailleurs devoir être pris dans une acception très large ... c'est, plutôt que la mère biologique, la parente qui vous a élevé: mère, tante ou soeur. (41-42)

[It is through the role of mother that the woman ... assumes her essential role. The term mother seems, moreover, to need to be taken into a broader meaning ... it is, rather than the biological mother, the relative who raises you: mother, aunt or sister.]

In the case of Laye, his mother plays the principal feminine role in his upbringing, but there are also other women who are influential. Jung, in *Aspects of the Feminine*, writes of the archetype of the mother. He says that the "mother archetype appears under an almost infinite variety of aspects" (109). He places the personal mother, grandmother, stepmother, and mother-in-law first in importance. Then he also says that any other woman with whom a relationship exists is also included as part of the mother archetype. In *L'enfant noir*, there are four women who function as extensions of the mother: the grandmother, the two aunts, and Marie.

The scene where Laye visits his grandmother is both universal and specific to African culture. The grandmother loves her grandson very much, and when he arrives at Tindican, she represents the universal doting grandmother. When Laye sees her, he runs to her, and she lifts him and presses him to her breast, and says: "How is my little husband getting on?" (46) She looks at him, touches him, and examines him. If satisfied, she is happy, but if she thinks he is too thin, she exclaims: "See that. Don't they eat in the city? You're not to go back there until you've been decently fitted out with new feathers. You know what I mean?" (47). This scene could be seen in many cultures throughout the world. In the interview with Leiner, Laye explains that: "l'homme est le même partout, sur tous les continents" [man is the same everywhere, on all continents] (156). This relationship between the grandmother and her grandchild is an example of the universality of man.

However, the events that follow are specific to the culture. They are greeted at each hut for news of Laye's family. He is welcomed with great ceremony, as though he were a leader in the area. It would often take two hours to walk from the first huts on the outskirts of the village to his grandmother's hut, a distance of one to two hundred meters. When the women finally do leave them alone, it is to cook

rice and poultry for the party that will be held in the evening. So, Laye's arrival is specific to the culture with the discussions and exchange of news at each hut, and the feast of the rice and poultry.

But the grandmother is older than the mother. What are her problems? Does she suffer from any illnesses? Does she experience symptoms of menopause? How do her eyes and ears function? Does she miss her husband who is dead? Is there a void in her life without him? Does she fear the future? Does she fear death? We don't know the answers to these questions from the text because the young grandson does not comprehend the intimate life of his grandmother. We only read of the love she has for him.

The two aunts at Conakry also represent the mother. They are the wives of his uncle, Mamadou, who is his father's brother. The aunts, Awa and N'Gady, have their own residences that they occupy with their children. Laye speaks highly of them in the text, and says that they were fond of him and treated him like their own child. He writes: "Yes, my aunts really put themselves out to take my mother's place. They did so all the time I was with them" (149-150). They encourage a relationship between Laye and a young, beautiful girl named Marie, who is a family friend. Of this relationship Laye states: "They loved us both and they would have liked us to become engaged despite our youth" (159). Aunt Awa is Mme Camara #1, Aunt N'Gady is Mme Camara #2, and they affectionately call Marie Mme Camara #3. So the aunts genuinely love their nephew, they help him to feel at home, and they encourage the relationship with Marie.

Laye pays homage to these women, but his point of view is very limited. How is life really with Mme Camara #1 and Mme Camara #2? What are the complexities in a life style in which two women share the same husband? How does one woman feel when the other wife is sleeping with the husband? What are the undercurrents of this marital triangle? Does each wife have her own specific problems? These questions are not addressed. We understand quite simply that the two women are kind and that they treat Laye like their own son.

Marie is also an extension of the mother because she is important in the life of Laye. He describes her as a half-caste, with light skin that is almost white, and long hair that falls down to her waist. He says she is "as beautiful as a fairy" (158), and is sweet, charming, and even-tempered. Marie is a student at a high school for girls, and her father is good friend of Mamadou. She spends Sundays with the Camara family. Marie and Laye are in love. They listen to records, dance, go on bicycle rides, study together, and particularly enjoy looking at the sea.

The sea as a feminine symbol is important in this text. Carl A. Viggiani, in discussing Albert Camus' *L'étranger*, asserts that a principal character in the novel

is the “mother-sea-Marie” (875). He also states: “As in traditional religious and mythic symbolism, then, in Camus’ works the sea bears the attributes of the mother: it signifies fertility, life, freedom, love, sexuality, and regeneration” (879). The triad, “mother-sea-Marie,” exists also in *L'enfant noir*; and the symbolism of the mother, fertility, life, liberty, love, sexuality, and regeneration is applicable to this autobiography. Laye expresses his attraction to the sea, and he writes:

we would sit and look at the sea. I loved to watch it. When I suddenly came upon it while first exploring Conakry, I had fallen in love with it at once. That vast plain.... Yes, perhaps the vast plain of water reminded me of another plain: Upper Guinea where I had grown up.... (163)

In the book, *L'univers symbolique d'Albert Camus*, Jean Gassin speaks of the sea as “le liquide amniotique” [the amniotic fluid], and he associates it with the feminine (33). So the sea is in this sense a symbol for Laye of his mother, his homeland, and his childhood.

The sea is also represents his youth, Marie, love, and sexuality. S. Beynon John, in his article “Image and Symbol in the Work of Albert Camus,” writes that the sea is “the arena of youth and hence, of life in so far as life can be equated with youthful vigor and the beginnings of the sexual cycle” (135). Furthermore, Bachelard explains that the water depicts the beloved or the wife. He says:

This substantial valorization that makes water an inexhaustible milk, the milk of Mother nature, is not the only valorization that characterizes water as profoundly feminine. In every man’s life—or at least in every man’s dream life—a second woman appears: the beloved or the wife. The second woman is also projected upon nature. The woman-landscape takes its place beside the mother-landscape. (126)

So the water represents youth, sexuality, sensuality, love and the “woman-landscape.” Marie, with the grandmother and two aunts, is an extension of the mother.

Laye expresses his love for Marie, but he does not explain her interior life. He tells us he loves her and adores to look at the sea with her, but he does not inform us of her intimate thoughts. Does she dream of marriage, maternity, and of having a home of her own? Does she wonder about sexual relations, what they are like, these mysteries. Does she suffer physically or emotionally when she has her period? Does she look at herself in the mirror to analyze her beauty: her face, her body, her skin, her hair? We do not read of this private perspective.

The mother in *L'enfant noir* is very important in the life of Camara Laye. Her strong influence is evident in his upbringing. The poem at the beginning of the text is a powerful testament of the intimate and moving relationship he had with his mother. The novel pays tribute to extensions of the mother, the grandmother,

the aunt, the guardian, who also function as nurturers and protectors in the life of a child. It emphasizes the beauty of love and of relations with the opposite sex (there is no mother without a father). Above all, it illustrates the power of a woman in the role of a mother in an African society. However, the book also lacks a penetration of the feminine characters. In this narrative by a masculine author who writes utilizing the point of view of a young boy, we do not comprehend the interior life of each woman. We do not read of the private triumphs, the frustrations and intimate difficulties, the dreams and unspeakable fantasies, or of the complex relations. Although the feminine symbols and archetypes emphasize a feminine presence, they are not sufficient to describe or psychoanalyze the emotions and profound sentiments of the women. ✱

Notes

¹ Christopher Miller, in his book *Theories of Africans*, writes:

Although it seems to me that the symbolics of gender association in *L'Enfant noir* tilt heavily in the direction of the father, it should be noted that the book is dedicated with a poem "To my mother." ... The mother is the spiritual equal of the father: coming from a great family of smiths herself, she is endowed with occult powers. (131-32)

In the article "Mothers and their Defining Role: The Autobiographies of Richard Wright, George Lamming and Camara Laye," Roosevelt Williams explains:

both mother and father are present throughout and take an active part in directing their child's personality. Thus, there is a strong father presence but the mother is more influential in molding the young Laye. (60)

² The English translation of the poem is by James Kirkup and Ernest Jones. They edit and dilute the potency of the poem which was originally written in French. Their translation does not mention specific ways in which the mother nurtured her child, and it excludes significant feminine symbols such as the water and earth. Here are the original French version by Laye, the Kirkup/Jones translation, and then my own translation.

A MA MÈRE

Femme noire, femme africaine, ô toi ma mère je pense à toi ...

O Dâman, ô ma mère, toi qui me portas sur le dos, toi qui m'allaitas, toi qui gouvernas mes premiers pas, toi qui la première m'ouvris les yeux aux prodiges de la terre, je pense à toi ...

Femme des champs, femme des rivières, femme du grand fleuve, ô toi, ma mère, je pense à toi ...

*O toi Dâman, ô ma mère, toi qui essayais mes larmes, toi qui me
réjouissais le coeur, toi qui, patiemment supportais mes caprices, comme
j'aimerais encore être près de toi, être enfant près de toi!*

Femme simple, femme de la résignation, ô toi, ma mère, je pense à toi

...

*O Dâman, Dâman de la grande famille des forgerons, ma pensée
toujours se tourne vers toi, la tienne à chaque pas m'accompagne, ô
Dâman, ma mère, comme j'aimerais encore être dans ta chaleur, être enfant
près de toi ...*

*Femme noire, femme africaine, ô toi, ma mère, merci; merci pour tout
ce que tu fis pour moi, ton fils, si loin, si près de toi!*

TO MY MOTHER (Kirkup/Jones translation)

Simple woman, patient woman, O mother, I think of you ...

*O Dâman, Dâman of the great race of blacksmiths, I think of you
always; always you are with me, O Dâman, my mother. How I should love
to still embrace you, to once again to be your child...*

*Dark woman, African woman, O mother, I thank you for all you have
done for me, your son, so far from you yet so near!*

TO MY MOTHER (my translation)

Black woman, African woman, O mother, I think of you ...

*O Dâman, O mother, who carried me on your back, who nursed me,
who governed by first steps, who opened my eyes to the beauties of the
world, I think of you ...*

*Woman of the fields, woman of the rivers, woman of the great river, O
mother, I think of you ...*

*O Dâman, O mother, who wiped my tears, who cheered up my heart,
who patiently dealt with my caprices, how I would love to still be near you.*

Simple woman, woman of resignation, O mother, I think of you.

*O Dâman, Dâman of the great family of blacksmiths, my thoughts are
always of you, they accompany me with every step, O Dâman, my mother;
how I would love to still feel your warmth, to be your child that is close to
you ...*

*Black woman, African woman, O mother, thank you; thank you for all
that you have done for me, your son, so far away yet so close to you!*

³ According to the notes that accompany the CD, "Call the Mothers!" is for women's chorus, flute, and drums, and marks the commencement of the circumcision rite.

[T]he music calls together the new group to be circumcised, who, with their mothers, go out of the village and into the bush. The flute (*tami fle*), a blacksmith's instrument consisting of an open pipe with four holes, is made from a vine that has been heated until the stem has dried into a hollow tube. (95)

“Song of the Newly Circumcised,” has to do with the retreat of the young boys in the bush where the operation is performed.

[T]he young men sing songs accompanying themselves on *sistra* (*wasamba*), made of circles of gourd strung on a forked handle. The song consists of the names of the first ten numbers, with word-play on each number. (95)

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