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MATERNAL EXPERIENCE AND NARRATIVE AUTHORITY IN MAGGIE O'FARRELL'S HAMNET AND THE HAND THAT FIRST HELD MINE

Xidirova Sarvinoz Mahmudjon qizi
Doctoral Researcher
Namangan State University, Uzbekistan
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Abstract

This essay examines how maternal experience acquires narrative authority in Maggie O'Farrell's Hamnet and The Hand That First Held Mine. Through comparative close reading of focalization, temporal disruption, and embedded representation, it distinguishes maternal centrality from control over remembrance. Agnes's care and interpretation of theatrical performance are read alongside Elina's postpartum disorientation and recovery of Lexie's maternal journalism. The novels recognize mothers through perspectives and media they cannot entirely control, yet those mediations also preserve significant differences between maternal experience and its transmission. Their endings make remembrance possible without restoring lost lives or intact archives. The comparison identifies maternal authority as a negotiated relation among embodied knowledge, narrative arrangement, and acts of reception.

Keywords

Maggie O'Farrell; motherhood; feminist narratology; narrative authority; memory; contemporary women's writing

Introduction

Being indispensable to a family does not necessarily make a mother the acknowledged interpreter of its history. Her work may sustain the conditions in which other people act, remember, and speak while remaining difficult to identify as a contribution in its own right. In fiction, a similar distinction separates maternal importance within the represented world from authority over the representation itself. A mother can occupy the emotional centre of a novel without narrating it. She can also become the object of intense remembrance without determining the terms on which she is remembered. These distinctions provide the starting point for a comparative reading of Maggie O'Farrell's Hamnet and The Hand That First Held Mine.

The comparison brings together a novel that reimagines Shakespeare's family and an earlier novel that connects women's lives across different periods. Their historical settings differ, and neither can stand as evidence for a universal maternal experience. What makes them productive partners is a formal problem: how can a narrative make the consequences of maternal experience available to readers when that experience is distributed across bodies, relationships, and incomplete accounts? The issue concerns the mother's place within narration as much as the representation of motherhood as a theme. It requires attention to what the narrator knows, what individual characters can perceive, and when readers are permitted to understand the relations between them.1

The argument distinguishes maternal centrality from maternal sovereignty. Centrality describes the importance that a narrative gives a mother's experience. Sovereignty would entail

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1 Narrative authority denotes the credibility and organizing force of an account, not a character's ability to prevent events. The short title The Hand denotes The Hand That First Held Mine.

control over its meaning and transmission. The two need not coincide. A narrative may make a mother's experience consequential while also showing that it passes through the recollections, interpretations, and artistic practices of others. Such mediation is not automatically an act of appropriation, but neither is it automatically an adequate form of recognition. Its effects must be assessed in particular scenes and narrative arrangements. The essay therefore treats authority as a relationship rather than a stable possession.

Scholarship on O'Farrell has already connected maternal experience with memory and narrative form. Stephen O'Neill examines the maternal reorientation of Shakespearean remembrance in Hamnet; Ruth Gilligan's published abstract situates The Hand That First Held Mine within a palimpsestic account of motherhood, female identity, and the city. More recently, Fernando Galván has read Agnes's practical independence as a form of female agency in biofiction. The present comparison asks a question that arises from these intersecting concerns: does making a mother indispensable to remembrance also give her control over the account that survives? Its answer turns on the difference between receiving a representation made by someone else and recovering a mother's own authored words (O'Neill 210–13; Gilligan; Galván 155–60).

Three questions organize the discussion. How do changes in focalization establish the value of maternal knowledge while preserving its limits? How do interruptions of chronological sequence distinguish a lived event from its later interpretation? What changes when maternal experience becomes another person's memory or a work of art? Taken together, these questions shift the argument away from a catalogue of maternal virtues and towards the conditions under which experience acquires narrative significance. They also make it possible to consider ambivalence and uncertainty without treating them as evidence that motherhood has failed.

The essay advances a comparative argument. O'Farrell's maternal figures are represented as centres of relational knowledge whose significance becomes legible through narrative arrangements that exceed any one character's perspective. Yet the same arrangements expose the distance between living through an event and knowing how to represent it. This distance is particularly important where care cannot prevent loss or where memory does not agree with an inherited family account. Recognition can change a character's understanding without undoing what happened. Narrative repair should consequently be distinguished from restoration of the lost person or recovery of a fully intact past.

The discussion places this argument in relation to feminist narratology and motherhood studies before examining the novels' treatment of practical knowledge, retrospective judgment, and artistic transmission. The primary analysis concentrates on Agnes's response to illness and her reception of Hamlet, Elina's early postpartum experiences, Lexie's combined maternal and professional responsibilities, and the final recovery of her journalism. These scenes establish a difference between narrative centrality and the means by which it becomes publicly or interpersonally intelligible. A final section considers the limits of the repair afforded by theatre and archival recovery. The comparison traces how authority changes when maternal knowledge moves between intimate relationships and public forms.

Critical Context

An inquiry into maternal representation must distinguish attention to mothers from an account of how their experiences are made knowable. A novel can include many scenes of childcare while retaining an interpretive structure in which someone else defines their meaning. Conversely, a mother need not speak in the first person for a narrative to give sustained attention to her perceptions. Counting maternal appearances or identifying sympathetic characterization is therefore insufficient. The critical task is to examine the movement between represented experience and the arrangements through which the reader encounters it.

Susan Sniader Lanser's account of gender and narrative treats gender as consequential for narrative forms, communicative contexts, and reception. Feminist narratology consequently asks

how formal categories can illuminate or obscure the social positions from which stories become intelligible. Lanser's discussion also resists a separation of narrative grammar from the contexts of its production and interpretation (Lanser). This orientation allows a mother's narrative importance to be examined without assuming that sympathy, first-person speech, and authority are interchangeable. It also requires attention to fathers, children, and other caregivers: the gendering of the narrative cannot be located only in its female characters.2

Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric feminism gives that inquiry a more specifically maternal focus. In her account, the concerns generated by motherwork require recognition within feminist thought; the category is defined through the work of mothering rather than restricted to biological maternity (O'Reilly). This approach supports an analysis of practical attention and responsibility without reducing women to reproduction. It also places shared care within the argument. Agnes's knowledge develops and operates alongside Mary and Eliza; Elina's recovery of Lexie's words depends on other people taking responsibility for immediate needs. Such relationships make maternal experience socially organized rather than the expression of an isolated natural disposition.

O'Farrell's own discussion of creative work helps situate the relation between maternal and professional identities. In a 2013 interview with Jonathan Lee, she rejects the assumption that having children necessarily prevents literary production, while acknowledging the schedules and compromises through which writing becomes possible. She also questions the gendering of domestic subjects in literary marketing (O'Farrell, "Talking"). These remarks do not determine the novels' meaning, but they identify a problem their working mothers make concrete: professional activity and care coexist under pressures that neither an ideal of effortless balance nor a division into separate selves adequately describes. Lexie's journey with Theo and Elina's attention to the surviving paintings render those pressures through particular tasks.3

Elaine Canning's introduction to Maggie O'Farrell: Contemporary Critical Perspectives locates recurring narrative layering and disrupted chronology within an oeuvre concerned with relationships, loss, and gaps between people (1–3). The comparison here narrows that broad conjunction to the transmission of maternal knowledge. Rearranging time matters because it changes who can explain an event and who must depend on a later account. The opening of Hamnet and the delayed disclosure of Ted's childhood both make the reader's knowledge diverge from a character's knowledge, but the divergences have different consequences for the mother's authority.

O'Neill's reading of Hamnet establishes maternal remembrance as an intervention in a cultural memory organized around Shakespeare and Hamlet. His analysis of the theatre sequence already identifies Agnes's perspective as essential to the performance's reparative effect (223–26). The present reading therefore does not treat maternal spectatorship as a previously unnoticed feature. Its comparative emphasis falls on the difference between Agnes's interpretation of

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2 Centrality, sovereignty, and mediated recognition are analytical distinctions developed for this comparison, not a classification attributed to Lanser. Centrality concerns narrative importance; sovereignty concerns control over meaning and transmission.

3 Lexie's newspaper column is embedded fictional writing. It is analyzed as a representation of maternal authorship within the novel, not as a separately retrieved historical newspaper article.

paternal production and Elina's retrieval of maternal authorship. O'Neill's account provides a basis for examining that difference rather than a position to be displaced by a claim of maternal discovery.

Galván makes a related argument about Agnes's agency, emphasizing her work as a healer and the novel's use of contemporary concerns within its reimagining of an early modern woman (155–60). His account makes the difference between historical documentation and fictional possibility important. The present essay accepts Agnes's agency as a feature of characterization but tests its reach at moments of illness and bereavement. Practical independence cannot secure a child's survival, and interpretive authority cannot restore a lost life. Those limits do not cancel agency; they identify the conditions under which it becomes consequential.

Gilligan's published abstract places the earlier novel's intertwined identities and London settings within the concept of the palimpsest. It expressly connects temporal layering to motherhood and female identity (Gilligan). The point of departure here is the movement from layered identity to the survival of an authored account. Lexie's journalism is not simply another trace through which Ted recognizes his past. It preserves an act of maternal self-representation that existed before his inquiry and outside the family that later withheld her history.4

These approaches bring form, maternal labor, and remembrance into a shared field of inquiry. The difficulty clarified by comparison is that making a mother central can also make recognition of her dependent on another person's interpretation. That dependency is not necessarily erasure. Agnes's resistance gives the theatrical encounter its interpretive force, while Elina's inquiry creates access to words Lexie wrote herself. The two recipients perform different kinds of work. Their agency makes recognition possible without granting control over the past or removing the mediation through which the mother becomes knowable.

Framework and Method

The term narrative authority has several possible meanings. In this essay, it refers to the ability of a perspective or account to organize what readers take to be significant and credible. It must be distinguished from practical power in the fictional world. A character can have little control over events while receiving extensive interpretive attention. A socially powerful character can also be exposed as having a limited or misleading understanding. The relation between those forms of power is an object of analysis; it should not be assumed in advance from a character's gender or familial position.

Maternal authority is a more limited category within that relation. It describes the recognition accorded to knowledge arising through a mother's experiences and relationships. Such knowledge may be practical, affective, bodily, or retrospective. Naming it maternal does not claim that it belongs exclusively to women or that mothers possess infallible insight. The category identifies how a text situates particular knowledge within a maternal relationship. It must remain possible for children, fathers, siblings, and other caregivers to contribute information that the mother does not possess. Otherwise, an analysis intended to recognize care would reproduce an expectation of maternal omniscience.

The distinction between voice and focalization is central to this method. Burkhard Niederhoff defines focalization through the selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to

4 The reference to Gilligan concerns the chapter's published abstract in the University of Birmingham Research Portal. The chapter's pagination in Works Cited identifies the published contribution; no page-specific claim about the full chapter is made.

experience and knowledge (Niederhoff). The voice that presents a passage need not belong to the person whose sensations or knowledge shape it. Third-person narration can move close to a child's limited understanding, disclose an adult's recollection, and then provide information inaccessible to either. Identifying these movements allows the analysis to ask how a reader is positioned in relation to the mother. Is she perceived from outside, interpreted by another character, or granted access to her own present or remembered experience? None of these arrangements has a fixed political value apart from its context.

Temporal order supplies another set of distinctions. An event may precede another within the represented world but appear after it in the telling. Information can also be repeated, withheld, or supplied retrospectively. These are basic analytical operations rather than independent proof that a novel is feminist. Their relevance emerges when they change the relation between knowledge and responsibility. For example, learning after an event why a caregiver was absent may produce a different judgment from encountering the absence alone. Equally, discovering a family connection can make earlier scenes newly intelligible without granting the absent person the opportunity to explain herself.

The method combines comparative close reading with an examination of interpretive consequences. Each passage is first considered in its local sequence: who perceives, what information is available, and how the narrative handles time. The reading then asks what the arrangement makes a reader expect or infer. Finally, the inference is tested against the distinction between centrality and control. An episode that gives the mother emotional importance should not automatically be described as giving her authority. Nor should every instance of another character remembering her be treated as erasure. These judgments require attention to how the mother's specificity survives the mediation.

The comparison does not regard historical differences as background decoration. Hamnet engages with an early modern family already associated with a dominant cultural name. The Hand That First Held Mine connects a mid-twentieth-century setting with contemporary parenthood. Their routes to maternal recognition consequently differ. One problem concerns the relation between intimate life and inherited literary fame; another concerns discontinuities within family knowledge. Formal similarities should be assessed in relation to those different pressures. A repeated concern with memory cannot establish that the same constraints operate in both fictional worlds.

The analysis uses the 2020 Knopf electronic edition of Hamnet and the 2010 Headline electronic edition of The Hand That First Held Mine. Both are reflowable texts without stable printed pagination. Parenthetical references identify the novel and its published part; notes locate the relevant unnumbered section by its opening words. This permits verification of the passages while retaining the distinction between the novels' published divisions and the technical divisions of an electronic file.5

Reading Care and Knowledge in Hamnet

Hamnet initially establishes maternal significance through a child's search. Moving through an unexpectedly empty household, the boy looks for the people whose availability ordinarily makes his world dependable. The mother's absence is a condition experienced by him before it

5 The electronic editions are identified internally as Knopf, 2020, ebook ISBN 9780525657613, and Headline, 2010, eISBN 9780755373277. Section incipits below serve as locators; reader-screen numbers are not treated as printed pages.

becomes an event interpreted by her. Near the end of this opening movement, narration shifts from the searching child towards the absent mother's future, describing the moment as one that will remain at her core. The passage gives the reader a retrospective significance that Hamnet cannot yet possess. Its emotional force derives from a difference between an ordinary search for help and the lifelong interpretation that search will acquire (O'Farrell, Hamnet, pt. I).6

The shift does not make Agnes an eyewitness to her child's search. Narration supplies the scene whose significance she will subsequently live with. Her experience is therefore central through an arrangement that exceeds her direct perception. This is an early example of maternal centrality without sovereignty: the scene is designated as consequential for the mother, but the text that makes it accessible moves through the boy's viewpoint and an external narrator. The reader must hold these positions together. To read only the boy's need would miss the mother's later relation to it; to read only the maternal retrospective meaning would absorb the boy's urgent present into someone else's grief.

When Agnes reaches Judith, the narrative grants close access to her diagnostic attention. She touches the girl's forehead, wrist, and cheek, then distinguishes the signs she observes: a high fever, rapid shallow breathing, and an erratic pulse. Her apparently calm inward description is set against her own bodily agitation. Knowledge here involves disciplined attention under pressure, not a serenity untouched by fear. The account of Hamnet's movements is similarly practical. When he begins explaining the uncut wood, Agnes interrupts: "Never mind the wood." The change of subject releases him from accounting for an unfinished task and redirects their attention towards the illness (O'Farrell, Hamnet, pt. I).7

Her competence does not silence his accusation. Hamnet asks, "Where were you?" and her answer identifies the swarming bees at Hewlands and a visit that took longer than expected. She apologizes for not being present. The sequence keeps care, absence, and accountability in relation without treating them as mutually exclusive. Agnes knows how to examine Judith, but that knowledge cannot erase the period in which the boy could not find assistance. Nor does the delay prove indifference. The novel shows a caregiver engaged in another task, a child distressed by the interruption of her availability, and an apology that recognizes his distress without supplying omnipotent hindsight.

The distinction matters because later knowledge can recast an absence as if its consequences should have been foreseeable. In this scene, the reason for Agnes's absence and the boy's anger arrive in the same exchange, preventing a simple conversion of his fear into a verdict on her maternal identity. The narrator then extends the problem of retrospective judgment to Susanna. Her glimpse of Hamnet's altered appearance will return to her repeatedly, accompanied by the question of whether drawing attention to it would have changed anything. The narrative answers that she will never know. An explicit limit is placed on causal certainty, even while the counterfactual becomes part of her continuing experience of loss.

Maternal knowledge is distributed rather than isolated. When Mary learns of Judith's condition, Agnes recognizes the older woman's remembered loss of her own daughter Anne. Their encounter connects a present illness to a prior maternal history. The text does not simply explain Mary's behavior through anger; Agnes understands fear within the apparently clenched response. Recognition then becomes coordinated action. The women's ordinary disagreements dissolve

6 Hamnet, Part I, unnumbered section beginning 'A boy is coming down a flight of stairs.'

7 Hamnet, Part I, unnumbered section beginning 'Agnes moves across the upstairs room'.

while they prepare medicine, bedding, and a fire. The comparison to "two hands of the same person" values cooperation without claiming that they have ceased to be distinct people (O'Farrell, Hamnet, pt. I). The collective activity gives maternal competence a practical form, produced in relation to another caregiver.

That cooperation does not guarantee agreement or success. A later passage follows Mary watching Agnes tend Judith through the night. Mary believes that the girl will die, whereas Agnes has repeatedly resisted sending for the father. Mary authorizes Eliza to write. This arrangement distributes interpretation and decision among several women: Agnes's commitment to remaining beside the child does not give her exclusive authority over the family's response. The shift into Mary's viewpoint makes Agnes visible as another mother sees her, recognizing both her devotion and the limits of her control (O'Farrell, Hamnet, pt. I).8

The son's actions further disrupt any account of the mother as the sole organizing consciousness of care. Hamnet imagines that he can trick Death by exchanging places with Judith, recalling the twins' earlier games of mistaken identity. He places himself beside her and conceives the action as a transfer of life. The text grants this intention a forceful interior existence while keeping it within his perception. It does not require the critic to accept the transfer as a medical explanation. Its importance is that the boy undertakes a protective act whose meaning is not fully available to the sleeping mother. A narrative attentive to maternal care also represents a child's attempt to care beyond the mother's oversight.

When Agnes wakes, her initial interpretation of the pallet must be revised. The entwined hands belong to two children; the child whose body now bears the fever is her son. The movement from assumption to recognition is rendered through the sequence of touch, light, and visual differentiation. It exposes the limits of familiarity as a guarantee of knowledge. Agnes knows her children intimately, but she must still discover what has happened while she slept. To make her eventual understanding the proof that she should have known earlier would ignore the narrative's account of how information becomes available (O'Farrell, Hamnet, pt. I).9

The death scene also refuses a single authoritative experience. Hamnet's inward movement through snow and cold is interwoven with Agnes's attempts to treat him and the responses of the surrounding family. Eliza's judgment of the violence of dying interrupts consoling descriptions of a peaceful departure. The scene gives each response proximity to the event without making any one perspective sufficient to contain it. Hamnet's death in his mother's arms establishes her bodily closeness, but it does not identify that closeness with access to everything he experiences. The difference between being there and knowing completely is preserved at the very moment when maternal presence is most intense.

In Part II, ordinary materials carry the difficulty of accepting the changed body. Agnes grips the dead boy's hand; warmth passes from her skin to his, allowing a precarious resemblance to the living hand. Her attention to the familiar hair gives bodily recognition a temporary purchase against visible change. The scene does not present this touch as a successful reversal. It makes the desire for continuity legible while the body's stiffness and altered appearance remain. Care persists, but its object can no longer respond as before (O'Farrell, Hamnet, pt. II).10

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8 Hamnet, Part I, unnumbered section beginning 'Agnes is sitting on the floor by the pallet'.

9 Hamnet, Part I, unnumbered section beginning 'Agnes startles awake'.

10 Hamnet, Part II, unnumbered section beginning 'A room. Long and thin'.

Burial introduces an especially exact conflict within maternal responsibility. While Hamnet is being lowered into the grave, Agnes looks towards the surviving Judith and misses the moment when the shroud disappears. A response to one child interrupts the final sight of another. The narration does not resolve this into a choice between adequate and inadequate care. It gives mourning a structure of divided attention: the mother cannot remain wholly available to the dead child while continuing to inhabit her relations with the living. The missed moment becomes part of grief, but its cause is neither indifference nor a rejection of the lost son.

The subsequent representation of Agnes's husband retains a different relation to grief. His professional pace in London permits months to pass, while his wife's grief is imagined as a current that could pull him under. The metaphor makes his self-protective understanding accessible without establishing it as a neutral description of Agnes. His account organizes her grief according to the danger it poses to his own capacity to continue. Read beside her desire to reverse time, it demonstrates that a shared bereavement does not produce a shared interpretation of what survival requires. The narrative's movement between them allows readers to recognize that difference rather than accept one response as the complete meaning of the loss (O'Farrell, Hamnet, pt. II).11

The final theatrical encounter changes the medium of remembrance but preserves disagreement long enough to matter. Agnes initially perceives the play as alien to her son. The dead king's name appears to detach the word from the boy whose life made it sacred to her. Her objection concerns the circulation of a name emptied of its intimate reference, not a general inability to appreciate theatre. She nearly leaves. By giving this resistance sustained attention, the novel makes artistic recognition an event that must occur rather than a value the mother is expected to endorse in advance (O'Farrell, Hamnet, pt. II).12

Recognition begins through bodily particularity. Agnes identifies her husband through movement and gesture beneath the ghost's costume. The young actor's gait, hair, and manner then make visible an imagined version of the son who might have grown into adolescence. The oscillation "It is him. It is not him" preserves both recognition and the impossibility of literal return. The actor is not the child, and Agnes knows that the child is buried. Yet the represented movement activates her knowledge of him. The scene gives her a kind of interpretive expertise that depends on intimate familiarity and cannot be replaced by an explanation of the play's plot.

Agnes infers the work of instruction and rehearsal through which her husband has prepared the actor. She then understands his taking of the ghost's role as an exchange of places with the dead son. Her interpretation links an artistic substitution to the wish of a parent to bear a child's suffering. This is an inference developed within her focalization, not a historical claim about Shakespeare's writing of Hamlet. The novel imagines the family's relation to the play; it does not establish documentary causation. The father's representation becomes meaningful because the mother interprets it, and the narration gives that interpretive act the concluding position.

The result is neither unrestricted maternal sovereignty nor simple submission to artistic authority. Agnes did not write or direct the play, and the representation cannot return her son.

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11 Hamnet, Part II, unnumbered section beginning '"Why?" she demands'.

12 Hamnet, Part II, final unnumbered narrative section beginning 'The truth is that Agnes's husband hasn't written for several months'. The family's relation to Hamlet is fictionalized, not documentary biography.

However, her rejection and revised understanding govern the reader's access to its familial meaning. The final extended hand marks a relation across a boundary that remains in place. Her husband's "Remember me" belongs to a performed speech and an intimate encounter at once. It leaves remembrance as an appeal requiring reception, not an accomplished cancellation of death. The mother becomes an active interpreter of a form she did not produce.

Memory and Recognition in the Hand That First Held Mine

The Hand That First Held Mine begins with the narrator's "Listen," giving reception a conspicuous role before the histories are connected. The initial garden is arranged as a scene to be watched, yet Lexie's movement through it is driven by impatience and a desire for her life to begin. The narrative establishes ambitions and perceptions that precede her maternal identity. Their continued importance prevents the later revelation of her relation to Ted from exhausting the significance of her earlier life (O'Farrell, The Hand, pt. One). Her history includes becoming a critic, forming attachments, mourning, working, and mothering. The eventual connection does not make those activities mere preparatory clues.13

Elina's first substantial scene begins with a radical discontinuity between bodily change and accessible memory. She wakes without recalling the birth and must recognize the baby through signs that do not initially form a coherent autobiographical sequence. Looking at her altered stomach and the infant, she confronts an outcome without the experience that would connect it to what she remembers. Ted's request that she remember introduces an external expectation of continuity at precisely the moment when she cannot meet it (O'Farrell, The Hand, pt. One).14

The scene differentiates maternal response from autobiographical completeness. When the child cries, Elina cannot retrieve the advice she has read. She tries to settle him and eventually feeds him, but his competence in finding the breast contrasts with her uncertainty about the duration and normality of the encounter. Care begins before a secure explanation of becoming a mother has returned. The novel thereby makes it possible to respond to the child without possessing an uninterrupted narrative of the birth. Recognition of that response should not be converted into the claim that instinct repairs memory. Her questions remain active while the feeding succeeds.

The narrative also gives Elina's physical needs duration and specificity. Weakness, pain, and exhaustion accompany the practical task of carrying and feeding the baby. The maternal body is neither a transparent instrument of care nor simply evidence that a child has been produced. It requires attention in its own right. This matters to narrative authority because Elina's experience includes forms of vulnerability that others can describe without living from her position. Knowing an obstetric account and inhabiting the aftermath of the event are different routes to knowledge; neither alone gives access to the whole scene.

Her artistic self is rendered through a concrete place. The studio stands at the end of the garden, available to sight but distant from remembered practice. Official forms still identify her as an artist, while the ordinary activity that made the designation meaningful feels inaccessible. This difference separates public classification from lived continuity. The novel does not demonstrate that motherhood has objectively ended her artistic identity. It shows a subject unable, at this

13 The Hand That First Held Mine, Part One, opening unnumbered section beginning 'Listen. The trees in this story are stirring'.

14 The Hand That First Held Mine, Part One, unnumbered section beginning 'Elina jerks awake'.

moment, to reconnect the label with a recognizable pattern of activity. The possibility of going to the studio persists as a proposed action rather than an already achieved reconciliation.

Ted's perception of her painting introduces another kind of mediation. He recalls secretly watching a work develop and understanding that access as a means of knowing what occurred inside her head. His remembered attention is affectionate, but his act also crosses the boundary she has placed around unfinished work. The scene prevents the partner's wish to understand from being automatically identified with authorized access. Elina can be a source of intense interest while retaining an interest in determining when her work is seen. That small conflict anticipates the essay's larger distinction between being valued and controlling the terms of representation.

Their access to the birth is also asymmetrical. Elina cannot recall it, while Ted remembers the medical emergency and finds his perception interrupted by an image of water and a questioning voice. The narration places present maternal vulnerability and an emerging paternal memory within the same sequence without making them equivalent. Elina's discontinuity concerns an event in which her body was directly involved; Ted's disturbance reaches towards a childhood history he does not yet recognize. Their different temporal relations to the birth prevent the new family from becoming a single consciousness with a shared story.

The visitor's medical vocabulary sharpens the problem. The question about the "section scar" presumes that a record and a term identify an experience Elina should recognize. Elina's understanding of "section" as a portion of something delays recognition of the surgical meaning. The clinical file contains facts that she cannot yet connect to memory. Her response to the visitor is not simply rejection of help; it is produced through pain, linguistic uncertainty, and the exhausting demand to account for herself in categories another person controls (O'Farrell, The Hand, pt. One). The narration preserves her perspective on the exchange rather than treating the file as a complete account of its significance.

Lexie's professional and maternal responsibilities are represented through another concrete mismatch between declarations and action. At her desk, she asks Felix to look after Theo while she undertakes an interview. His hesitation and suggestion that his mother will help shift the practical responsibility elsewhere. Lexie's clarification, "Our son," counters the treatment of Theo as chiefly her problem. The scene makes unequal availability visible through the conversational pauses and evasions, not through a general statement about motherhood (O'Farrell, The Hand, pt. Two).15

When Geraldine cannot help, Lexie takes Theo on the journey. The interview is not displaced by motherhood, but accomplishing it requires additional physical and logistical work. Trains, a ferry, luggage, nappies, and the child's carrier become part of professional mobility. That narrative detail prevents maternal competence from appearing as a frictionless power to do everything. Lexie remains a journalist because she continues to organize work around constraints that are unevenly shared. The presence of the child within the professional scene also refuses the assumption that the maternal and working self occupy entirely separate worlds.

Her final day likewise preserves plurality before reducing the field of attention through mortal danger. The Lyme Regis section contains desire for Robert, plans for food, observation from a hotel window, conversation with Theo, and the flying of a kite. Lexie recognizes the metaphor the child is struggling to make; his delight lies partly in being understood. The maternal relation is rendered through interpretation as well as provision. At the same time, the day belongs to an adult

15 The Hand That First Held Mine, Part Two, unnumbered section beginning 'Lexie sits at her desk in the Courier office'.

whose sensual pleasure and appetite for swimming remain distinct from the child's needs (O'Farrell, The Hand, pt. Two).16

The narration then makes an ordinary expectation fail. Lexie enters the sea again, and Robert's reply to Theo's "Where's Mama?" initially assumes that she will return. The repetition forces reassessment while the search remains uncertain. The reader receives the scene through the adult and child left on shore before the narrative moves towards Lexie's experience in the water. This distribution matters: neither witness possesses the knowledge of her struggle that narration subsequently supplies. Her disappearance is publicly observable, but its maternal meaning is not exhausted by the accounts available to those observers.

In the dying woman's perspective, the future takes the form of specific tasks she will not perform. Dinner, the kite, bathing, clothes, school, handwriting, illness, and later heartbreak form a history anticipated through care. The list moves from the evening ahead towards the son's adulthood. Death interrupts not only an existing bond but a practical future imagined in detail. The words "Theo, I tried" articulate a wish that cannot be delivered to him in the scene. They are made available to the reader, not restored to the child by an impossible communication. The distinction between narrative access and interpersonal access remains intact.

The shift from Lexie's experience back to Ted's confrontation with his parents gives that distinction lasting consequences. Felix identifies Lexie as Ted's mother and explains her drowning; Margot's earlier substitution becomes narratively explicit. In the retrospective account of the child's arrival, naming is one of the mechanisms by which the new history is installed. He resists "Theodore," is offered "Ted," and asks whether Margot is his mother. Her affirmative response supplies the account he cannot independently test (O'Farrell, The Hand, pt. Two). The later recovery is therefore not simply an emergence of accurate memory from innocent forgetting. It challenges an answer given by an adult with power over a distressed child.17

The novel distinguishes maternal erasure from maternal absence. Lexie's death makes further physical care impossible; the withholding of her identity and history is another action, undertaken afterwards. Conflating them would treat the destruction of evidence as an inevitable consequence of bereavement. The final section resists that conflation through the confrontation over her possessions. Felix discovers that the clothes, books, and other stored materials have been removed. His own failure to oppose the substituted family account also comes into view. The recovery of the mother is limited both by deliberate acts and by the compliance of others (O'Farrell, The Hand, pt. Two).18

Elina's response makes her artistic knowledge consequential. She recognizes the significance and value of the surviving paintings where Felix has treated them chiefly as familiar objects. Her

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16 The Hand That First Held Mine, Part Two, unnumbered section beginning 'This is where the story ends.'

17 The Hand That First Held Mine, Part Two, unnumbered section beginning 'It's nightfall by the time they reach London.'

18 The Hand That First Held Mine, Part Two, final unnumbered narrative section beginning 'Elina hurries down the stairs and opens the front door.'

insistence on appropriate transport establishes a professional judgment that the earlier postpartum scene could not readily supply to her. Artistic identity is now enacted through a practical decision, rather than merely affirmed by a label. Motherhood remains present through Jonah, whom she hands to Felix while examining the works. This redistribution of immediate care permits attention to the objects; it does not require her to cease being a mother in order to exercise expertise.

The typewriter then prompts a movement beyond the private household. Elina visits newspaper archives and recovers Lexie's published writing. This changes the medium and direction of remembrance. The lost mother is not only an object described by relatives; her own professional and maternal words survive in a public record. Their availability depends on Elina's inquiry, the archive's assistance, and the work of arranging the articles for Ted. Authority therefore returns through a chain of reception, but what is received includes a first-person account authored by Lexie.

The maternal column joins professional practice to everyday relation. Elina reads the title "From the Frontline of Motherhood" and a passage distinguishing the public name Theodore from the intimate name Theo. The mother's naming reappears in her own sentence, challenging the history imposed after her death. The revelation is not a simple replacement of one name with another. It reconnects Ted with a relation to naming that preceded the later household's account (O'Farrell, The Hand, pt. Two). The recovered words make visible a mother who observed and represented their life together, rather than a mother whose existence matters only because someone now remembers her.

Ted's "Keep going, El" ends the novel with a request for continued reading. It does not certify a completed psychological recovery. The narrative reaches a point at which the mother's words can be heard and their reception can continue. Elina's work brings Lexie's maternal writing into the son's present without claiming to rebuild the destroyed private archive or undo the drowning. The ending thus offers a materially specific form of repair: access to surviving words changes a damaged relation to the past, while the losses that made the inquiry necessary remain.

Comparative Discussion

The concluding scenes make the mother's relation to representation especially clear. Agnes receives a form created by her husband; Elina locates a form created by Lexie. In both cases recognition depends on a recipient who moves beyond an initial framework of understanding. Agnes revises her view of the play as a misuse of the boy's name. Elina moves from the surviving household objects towards the public archive. Their agency is interpretive and practical. They neither generate the past nor determine everything that survives, but they alter the conditions under which it can matter to another person.

This pairing identifies a significant difference between representation of a mother and representation by a mother. Hamlet does not provide Agnes with a recovered maternal account. Its familial meaning emerges through her interpretation of paternal production, extending the relation between maternal perception and theatrical remembrance that O'Neill identifies (223–26). Lexie's column, however, embeds maternal authorship within a narrative that otherwise presents her largely through third-person arrangements. The archive allows the reader and Ted to encounter words she wrote about their life together. It is therefore insufficient to describe both endings simply as a recovery of memory. Their routes to authority differ in who originally produced the representation and who subsequently interprets or reads it.

Neither route is transparent. The actor becomes recognizable through the father's rehearsal and the mother's intimate knowledge, while the newspaper column arrives through Elina's selection and reading. Both scenes involve an intermediary. That presence does not invalidate recognition, but it prevents an account of remembrance as immediate access to the lost person. Agnes's knowledge of gestures can identify a resemblance while leaving the actor distinct from

her son. Ted can hear Lexie's maternal words while depending on an archive and a living reader. Recognition resides in these relationships, not in the elimination of mediation.

Their formal endings also resist final possession of the past. Hamnet ends with an appeal to remember; The Hand That First Held Mine ends with an appeal to continue. These requests place a future responsibility on reception. The reader leaves each novel at an opening into sustained remembrance rather than a documented return to ordinary life after complete healing. Although Hamnet anticipates an encounter between Agnes and her husband after the performance, it does not narrate an entire reconciled future. The earlier novel similarly gives Ted a movement towards listening without demonstrating a settled resolution of the deception.

The presence of hands gives these relations a bodily dimension. Agnes first tries to sustain continuity by warming the dead boy's hand; at the theatre she extends her hand towards a living representation separated from her by the stage. In the earlier novel, Lexie guides Theo's hand on the kite, Margot takes his hand while claiming maternity, and Elina takes Ted's hand as the recovered name becomes audible. These gestures should not be assigned a single fixed meaning. Their contexts differentiate support, attempted preservation, deceptive reassurance, and renewed contact. The recurrence makes touch available as a language whose ethical value depends on the account it accompanies.

The difference between care and explanation is equally recurrent. Agnes acts on symptoms while uncertainty persists; Elina feeds Jonah while her own narrative of the birth remains inaccessible. Neither mother needs a complete retrospective explanation before responding to the child. Conversely, later explanation cannot prevent Hamnet's death or Lexie's drowning. A feminist reading of competence must therefore avoid identifying care with comprehensive knowledge. The novels give care material force while showing that effective attention in one moment does not guarantee control over every consequence.

The attention to postpartum language adds a further qualification. A clinical record can know an event in one register, while the woman who underwent it cannot yet recognize herself within that register. This mismatch is different from Ted's discovery of deception. Elina's memory discontinuity should not be equated with the withholding and destruction through which Lexie's history becomes unavailable. The first involves an embodied aftermath represented as difficult to narrate; the second includes decisions made by other people. Both affect access to the maternal, but their causes and ethical implications remain distinct.

Similarly, Agnes's temporary absence at Hewlands and Lexie's permanent absence after drowning should not be placed under a general category of missing mothers without qualification. The searching child in Hamnet can confront his mother, hear an explanation, and receive an apology. Theo cannot hear the account that narration gives the reader of Lexie's struggle. Her unspoken wish to tell him that she tried marks an irreparable loss of direct communication. The later archive does not deliver that exact message. It provides different surviving words with a different history of production. The distinction keeps archival repair from becoming a sentimental restoration of everything lost.

The most exact common feature is therefore a divided account of maternal presence. The mother can be available in remembered gestures, material traces, writing, or another person's performance without becoming physically present again. Such presence can be consequential while remaining recognizably mediated. The narrative's value lies partly in enabling a more adequate relationship to the absence. It does not require declaring absence conquered. This is why the oscillation between the actor being and not being the son matters as much as the discovery of the column: recognition retains its limit within the form that makes it possible.

The comparison also places mothers in a network of differentiated care. Mary, Eliza, and Susanna contribute to the response to illness. Elina's inquiry depends on Simmy remaining with Ted and on others helping her access archival materials. Lexie's professional journey reveals what

happens when the proposed care network does not deliver the help it promises. These relations prevent maternal authority from being grounded exclusively in individual self-sufficiency. The novels make dependencies visible, including dependencies whose costs are unevenly distributed. Recognition of the mother's practical knowledge does not justify expecting her to supply every form of care alone.

The historical differences remain important. Hamnet reimagines a family whose relation to an inherited literary name is already culturally prominent. The Hand That First Held Mine reconstructs a mother whose published work survives outside a family story that excluded her. In one case a public artistic form becomes interpretable through the mother's intimate knowledge; in the other a public archive interrupts the family's control over the mother's history. Private experience and public representation exchange positions across the comparison. This difference supplies a more specific result than the observation that both novels concern motherhood and memory.

Maternal centrality can now be described more precisely. It appears when a mother's perceptions, labor, and interpretations change the account readers can make of the represented lives. Sovereignty would require control over the whole history and its circulation. Neither novel grants that control. Agnes must receive a representation produced elsewhere; Lexie's maternal words reach her son only through later acts she cannot direct. Yet Agnes governs the final recognition, and Lexie's writing challenges the imposed maternal substitution. The texts thus establish authority through situated interventions rather than an uninterrupted possession of the story.

Counterreadings and Limits

The reading of Hamnet must contend with the possibility that the ending restores paternal artistic authority. Agnes recognizes the work her husband has undertaken and interprets his performance as an exchange of places with the son. A critic could see her response as legitimating the writer's achievement after a novel devoted to domestic loss. That pressure is real. The argument here rests on the narrative's retention of her initial resistance and on its presentation of recognition through her embodied perception. Her response does not simply confirm a prefabricated explanation delivered by the artist. She interprets gestures and reconstructs the work behind them. The distinction moderates the objection but does not eliminate the cultural prominence the play receives.

The earlier novel likewise makes its recovered mother important to a son's crisis. Lexie's history can consequently appear to serve his need for an adequate explanation of identity. Yet the earlier strand includes work, relationships, erotic desire, and choices that exceed that explanatory function. The maternal column is also a form of authorship that predates Ted's inquiry. The mother is not created as an interpretive object only when the son needs her. His late reception is placed after the reader has been given substantial access to her life, including experiences he cannot recover from the surviving articles.

The drowning scene presents another difficulty. Its account of Lexie's final thoughts concentrates exclusively on Theo and includes a generalizing claim about the singularity of maternal love. That passage can be read as reinstating the ideal of the irreplaceable mother. The present analysis does not adopt its generalization as an empirical statement about all caregivers. It reads the passage as a representation of Lexie's urgent perception within a particular mortal situation. The preceding day's preservation of her desire and independence provides a context that complicates, but does not erase, the intensity of the maternal identification at death.

The comparison is limited to selected narrative sequences, not a numerical distribution of focalization across the two novels. Its terms describe how authority operates in those sequences rather than a universal model of mothering. In particular, Elina's postpartum discontinuity, Agnes's grief, and the suppression of Lexie's history involve different conditions of knowledge.

Keeping those conditions distinct prevents the formal resemblance between delayed disclosures from becoming an equivalence between bodily vulnerability, bereavement, and deliberate deception.

Conclusion

The comparison shows maternal authority emerging through relations among care, representation, and reception. Agnes's attention to illness is competent without being infallible; her knowledge of the child becomes decisive in the interpretation of a performance she did not create. Elina's early difficulty in recognizing the story of her own childbirth coexists with practical maternal response. Later, her professional knowledge and archival inquiry make Lexie's own maternal words available to Ted. These different arrangements establish the significance of maternal experience without placing every event or account under the mother's control.

The distinction between centrality and sovereignty clarifies what the endings accomplish. Agnes recognizes an imagined continuation of the son while preserving knowledge that the actor is not him. Ted begins to hear a mother's authored account without receiving everything the destroyed private archive might have supplied. Theatre transforms remembered gestures; archival reading restores access to surviving sentences. Neither returns a lost life, and neither removes the intermediary through whom recognition occurs. Their value lies in changing the relations of the living to traces that remain, rather than promising total recovery.

That result qualifies both celebratory and skeptical accounts of maternal representation. Sympathy alone does not establish narrative authority, since a mother can be valued while her account is withheld or reframed. Mediation alone does not prove erasure, since another person's work can create conditions in which her specificity becomes newly perceptible. The interpretation requires attention to who produced the account, who receives it, and what survives its passage between them. O'Farrell's novels make those questions part of their form through shifts of perspective, discrepancies of knowledge, and embedded acts of representation.

The pairing also distinguishes two movements between private and public knowledge. In Hamnet, a culturally recognizable public form becomes intimate through maternal interpretation. In The Hand That First Held Mine, public writing challenges the closure of a deceptive private family account. The mother's significance is therefore neither confined to domestic experience nor adequately described as its escape into art. It is made intelligible through particular exchanges among bodily knowledge, material evidence, professional practice, and sustained reception. The final requests to remember and to continue place that reception beyond the immediate ending, leaving authority consequential but unfinished.

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