

## Mothers of the Mind: The Remarkable Women Who Shaped Virginia Woolf, Agatha Christie and Sylvia Path

**Rachel Trethewey**

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Rachel Trethewey's *Mothers of the Mind* is a studied, reflective analysis of the relationships between three literary icons and their mothers.

Virginia Woolf's mother, Julia, is presented as a woman of remarkable beauty who rejected feminist ideals and presided over her busy household with queenly detachment. Her death in 1895 haunted Virginia, who was thirteen at the time; she later espoused her own feminist theories in troubled defiance of her mother and included characters inspired by Julia in her modernist novels.

In contrast, mystery writer Agatha Christie and her mother, Clara, enjoyed an adoring relationship. In observing her "unassuming" mother, Agatha realized that the most intriguing characters were not "always the ones who immediately attract attention." For Agatha, Clara's death in 1926 was a painful loss that coincided with the discovery of her husband's infidelity. Struggling with depression and psychological disorientation, Agatha even made a "half-hearted" suicide attempt.

But the most entangled dynamic explored here is that between poet Sylvia Plath and her mother, Aurelia. The heroine of Sylvia's novel *The Bell Jar* struggles with mental illness and tries to distance herself from her ineffectual, conformist mother; in reality, Sylvia shared a strong bond with Aurelia, even through their periods of geographical separation. Aurelia's own youthful aspirations are detailed alongside her teaching career, with Trethewey also revealing how, after Sylvia's suicide, Aurelia was perturbed by people's warped, cultish perceptions of her daughter's life.

The three separate portraits evoke their settings with historical finesse, from Victorian and Edwardian England to midcentury America. The complexities and contrasts within each relationship are developed with restraint, in consideration of the positive and negative impacts of each woman's own maternal environment.

Via three revelatory and compelling case studies, *Mothers of the Mind* examines the pivotal impact of mother-daughter relationships upon the creative process.

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