


12-1-1995

Birth and After Birth and Painting Churches: Tina Howe's Examination of Love and Savagery in the American Family

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BIRTH AND AFTER BIRTH AND PAINTING CHURCHES:
TINA HOWE'S EXAMINATION OF LOVE AND SAVAGERY IN THE AMERICAN
FAMILY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Sarah Chambers-Ennis
December 1995

BIRTH AND AFTER BIRTH AND PAINTING CHURCHES:

TINA HOWE'S EXAMINATION OF LOVE AND SAVAGERY IN THE
AMERICAN FAMILY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to Dr. Pat Carr, who has not only proven to be the most inspiring teacher I have ever had the privilege to work with but also a gracious and lovely lady I am proud to consider a friend.

I would also like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Oakes and Dr. James Flynn for serving on my graduate committee.

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December 1995

59 pages

Directed by: Patricia Carr, Elizabeth Oakes, and James Flynn

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

Playwright Tina Howe has been quoted as saying that "family life has been over-romanticized; the savagery has not been seen enough in the theatre and in movies . . ." (Moore 101). In two of her plays, *Birth and After Birth* (1973) and *Painting Churches* (1983), that savagery appears in the form of name-calling, jealousy, apathy, disregard, and physical and mental abuse. A juxtaposition of the similarities in *Birth and After Birth* and *Painting Churches* will explain the "savagery" Howe is examining.

The earlier play is written in the surrealistic style of Ionesco and Beckett, playwrights who have been a major influence on Howe. The later work is a much more realistic, conventional play. Both center around three-member families (a set of parents and an only child) and take place at a time of significant change.

The main focus is *Painting Churches* and the abuse that lies at the heart of the play. Mags Church (short for Margaret) has come home to help her parents, Fanny and Gardner, pack their things; they are moving from Boston to their summer cottage in Conduit. A promising young artist on

the rise, she is also going to paint a portrait of them. But the painting of this portrait will be much more than the creating of a new piece of art for Mags; it will be a very personal and very trying test. Throughout the play, Howe reveals Mags' multifaceted mental and emotional problems and how her mother, while essentially a loving parent, contributed greatly to her daughter's lack of self-esteem and need to mask herself behind her work. She may even be responsible, and this thesis proves that Fanny Church subjected her only child to continuous psychological abuse, creating in her a deep-rooted psychosis.

Birth and After Birth, written a decade earlier, examines some of the issues addressed in *Painting Churches*, and is basically used as back-up evidence to help prove my theory.

CHAPTER 1

TINA HOWE: AN UNDAUNTED ARTIST FINDS HER OWN MATERIALS

In 1960, recent Sarah Lawrence graduate Tina Howe, who was spending a year in Paris, happened upon a small Left Bank theater, La Huchette, where *The Bald Soprano* was being performed. An aspiring playwright herself, Howe had read, but never seen, Eugene Ionesco's work on the stage. Twenty-six years later, Howe was given the opportunity not only to meet Ionesco, but also to convey to him and to the audience at the New York City 92nd Street "Y" the impact the performance she had seen in 1960 had had on her. Ionesco was the speaker of the evening in a series of great writers' readings from their works, and Howe had been offered the privilege of introducing him. Recalling her evening at La Huchette, she said, "It was as if I had been struck by lightning. The curtain went up and all hell broke loose. I had not seen such goings on since the Marx

Brothers movies. The sheer outrageousness of Ionesco's dramatic sense and language, the way he turns things on their head. He is often called an absurdist. To me he is the ultimate realist. He shows us the laxness of reality and what a pathetic time we have getting through the day. For me it's the kitchen sink dramas and formula comedies that are absurd because they present us with stereotypes, and not the real world" (Lamont 27).

Her viewing of *The Bald Soprano* was certainly not Howe's first foray into eccentricity and word play in art (although it proved to be the most impressionable). Her father, Quincy, was a distinguished, often honored, broadcaster and writer of the 1940's and 1950's. Howe's mother Mary was a "tall, highly dramatic Boston *grande dame* addicted to wearing with perfect aplomb extravagant hats" (30). Her paternal grandfather was Mark Antony DeWolfe Howe, a poet and Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer. A gift for words, as well as the desire to manipulate and play with language and images, was passed on to Tina Howe by her parents and grandfather.

She grew up in New York City, where she attended an array of finishing schools which, as she comments, "set her teeth on edge" (30). Just as she was about to enroll in a local high school, Howe's

father left CBS and moved to Urbana, Illinois to become a university professor of journalism. Surprisingly, it was in this inauspicious setting that Howe found a school that offered her more than the dry, conventional education she had experienced in New York. University High, an extremely experimental school, offered her the freedom and means to explore and begin to develop her artistic, creative impulses.

After graduation she enrolled in Bucknell, but, faced with the same restricting formality she had encountered in the finishing schools of her youth, she transferred to the prestigious Sarah Lawrence, where she met Jane Alexander, who remains one of Howe's closest friends. The classrooms of Sarah Lawrence opened to her the immense cultural gamut of the city, a side of New York she had not realized in the past, with its art galleries, theaters, and museums. It was while attending Sarah Lawrence that Howe wrote her first play, which "is still in a dark drawer somewhere" (Moore 101).

Upon graduation Howe went to France, "a country in the throes of a powerful artistic renaissance following its recovery from the Second World War" (Lamont 29). As noted above, it was the new dramaturgic mode of Metaphysical Farce, championed by Ionesco,

that impressed and inspired Howe the most. After a year in Paris, she returned to America, married Norman Levy, a former acting student turned Ph.D. candidate, and had her two children: Eben and Dara. Having taken on the financial responsibilities of a family and home, Howe was forced to put play writing on hiatus while she taught high school English to help supplement the family income.

When she turned to drama at last, she published *The Nest* in 1971. The New York critics, who had been weaned and reared on the realism of Stanislavsky, weren't sure what to make of this new playwright and her wildly imaginative, Ionesco-inspired work. First produced in Provincetown, *The Nest* was quite a hit, until it moved Off Broadway. Once there, even such sophisticated, civilized journalists as Clive Barnes found the play repulsive. "Howe still shudders when she recalls: 'My own agent fired me!'" (30-1).

More determined than ever, Howe refused to quit. "It's the New Englander in me. The more I get slapped down, the harder I work to show them they're wrong" (Wetzsteon 66). Undaunted, Howe wrote the still unproduced *Birth and After Birth*, her first examination of the inner-dynamics of a three-party family (a set of parents and their only child).

With her next three plays, *Museum* (1976), *The Art of Dining*

(1979), and *Painting Churches* (1983), Howe was more wary of the critics who could “make or break” her, and so, according to Lamont, she “began to cover her tracks.”

On the surface, her plays assumed the smooth mask of realism, and their ironic tone of a slick comedy of manners. She portrayed a world of elegant, well-born people . . . yet this seemingly peaceful, *comme il faut* ambience never failed to boil up, to erupt in strange volcanic utterances and events” (29).

Museum, which features several characters wandering about a museum while commenting on art, brought Howe her first critical success. New Yorker’s Edith Oliver praised it as “an enchanting experience. The play is a collage of words and characters and action It has plenty of wit and humor” (67-8). “*Museum* is as much fun as a Feiffer cartoon of an avant garde event,” raved John Beaufort in The Christian Science Monitor. “Miss Howe is a dramatist to watch” (26). Ironically, with these first critical laurels also came the satisfaction of subtle revenge for Howe. In Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights, Howe points out that “*Museum* is

a play *about* criticism. Everybody entering the museum had a very strong point of view. I was making fun of that. I think it made the critics feel very self-conscious” (230).

Oliver was also impressed with *The Art of Dining*. She called the play, which chronicles the struggles of a young couple operating their new restaurant, “a delightful comedy” (99), and Harold Clurman of The Nation declared *The Art of Dining* “a tasty dish . . . [and] sprightly celebration” (28).

In February 1983, Howe’s greatest success came with the production of *Painting Churches* at New York’s South Street Theatre. *Painting Churches* is a seemingly conventional play about the vanishing breed of Boston brahmins” (Lamont 30), patterned after the playwright’s own family. The father, Gardner Church, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, and the description of Howe’s mother given above is an exact description of Fanny Church, the mother in the play. The daughter, Mags (short for Margaret), is obviously patterned after Tina Howe herself. Held in high esteem not only by the U.S. theater-going public and by critics but also by her peers, *Painting Churches* was awarded the coveted Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 1983.

Howe is a wonderfully perceptive observer of contemporary

mores and issues, and by returning to the three-party family she first presented in *Birth and After Birth*, she is able to probe into “the mystery of the hearth” which she finds fascinating (31). It is Howe’s contention that, as a member of any family, whether one is a parent, sibling, or child, “you experience moments of excruciating tenderness and love, but there is also great savagery. Family life has been over-romanticized; the savagery has not been seen enough in the theater and in movies” (Moore 101). In an attempt to redress the balance, Howe focuses on this combination of love and savagery within the familial unit in *Birth and After Birth*, and again a decade later in *Painting Churches*.

Birth and After Birth is only her second published play, and Howe still had not reached the level at which she was able to break away from mimicking the styles of Ionesco; therefore, the play is a surrealist, high modernist work. *Painting Churches* is much less so, although the surrealism remains; it is, however, interwoven with and often hidden by the play’s more realistic, conventional dialogue, setting, and action.

In both plays the “savagery” explored includes power struggles, isolation, verbal assaults, terrorization, the undermining of self-esteem, rejection, apathy and abuse-both physical and

psychological.

In her first attempt at dealing with these extremely personal and hurtful subjects, Howe does not attack the issues she has chosen to examine in a direct and realistic manner, but instead through the exaggerated and “larger-than-life” approach of surrealism. It is only after ten years of maturation, both as a playwright and a person, that she is able to put her parents and herself up on the stage in an essentially realistic setting and probe the mix of love and savagery she first explored in *Birth and After Birth*. Seen in this light, *Birth and After Birth* becomes a kind of precursor--a practice run--to *Painting Churches*.

CHAPTER II

THE APPLES AND THE CHURCHES:
GROTESQUE STAGE CARTOONS OF THE
LOVING AMERICAN FAMILY

Because it was never produced, critical analyses of *Birth and After Birth* aren't available. The play has been investigated only in conjunction with Howe's other works in scholarly articles and journals. Such is not the case with *Painting Churches*. Critical reactions to it are numerous. Interestingly, none of the critics who reviewed the play recognized the deeply rooted dysfunction of the Churches, nor did they indicate any observation or knowledge of the abuse that is evidenced throughout the play. None of them gets past the "smooth mask of realism" Lamont identifies to critique fully the savagery within. New York Times critic Frank Rich claims that *Painting Churches* is the story of a "prodigal child who returns home to resolve her relationship with her parents, even as the parents settle scores with each other" ("Theater"16). In another review,

written nearly a year later, he describes the play as Mags' journey home to "fix [her parents] both esthetically and emotionally by . . . seeing [them] clearly and whole, in the mature light that reveals all" ("Stage"13). In both articles, Mr. Rich points out that Mags has suffered emotionally and that this play is basically the story of her reconciling herself to and forgiving her parents. He does not, however, theorize exactly what these problems may be nor does he appear to realize how deeply they run. Instead, he expounds on the beauty and "high, lacy gloss" of *Painting Churches* and does not himself see the Churches "clearly and whole, in the mature light that reveals all."

The same is true for other critics as well. T.E. Kalem labels Howe's play as an interrogation of the "generation gap"; a play about the "estrangement and reconciliation of a daughter and her parents" (73). John Simon, in "The Miller's Stale," calls *Painting Churches* "an old story . . . [with] some drinking and fighting, and quite a bit of reminiscing and mutual revelation" (53); again the conventional parental-child conflict is acknowledged, but not fully explained or scrutinized. Both Rich and Kalem come to the realization that the characters in Howe's play have problems, but neither views these problems as more than the typical dynamics that most families

encounter. Each is “lured by the pleasant comedy-of-manners surface of [the play] . . . and fail to notice [its] dark subtext” (Lamont, 36).

Many of those who have made an attempt to understand the tensions in this family stop short with their examinations; they have failed to probe into the multiple neuroses and deeply-rooted dysfunctions of the Churches and have instead seen only as far as the more blatant surface features.

Gerald Weales, in “Howe’s Churches Promises More Than It Delivers,” places the blame on the idea that “the parents--the famous poet and the flamboyant mama--have so intimidated the child that even now, welcomed by the New York art world, she wants their approval most of all” (17). This theory is only superficially true. Weales’ vision does not pierce through the illusionary “smooth mask of realism”; he does not see past it to the submerged gears and machinations that power the Churches’ interactions.

As for Robert Brustein, he, in his review in The New Republic, places the blame on Mags, whose “selfish failure to recognize [her father’s] condition or share responsibility for it” (23) causes Fanny to feel resentment; obviously he completely misses out on the fact that the problems between Mags and her mother did not begin when

Gar developed his “condition,” but have existed and evolved since Mags was a child, thereby eradicating the possibility that the fault lies with her.

Elizabeth McGovern, the second actor to play the role of Mags, comes much closer to understanding how complex and scarred the young artist really is. In a New York Times interview conducted by Carol Lawson, Miss McGovern says, “This role has the biggest jumps from one level to the next in the shortest space of time” (2). This acknowledgement of Mags’ extensive complexities show a greater comprehension of the relationship she has with her parents. Just as Lamont describes *Birth and After Birth, Painting Churches* is also a “grotesque stage carton of the loving American family” (32). Mags is indeed a multilayered character whose emotional wounds are the result of some form of abuse. The evidence of this abuse is not immediate, nor is it ever blatantly obvious, as is the case in *Birth and After Birth*, but is instead revealed subtly, one layer at a time.

An examination of the inner machinations of the Apples, the couple of *Birth and After Birth*, and the Churches must begin with the parents, who, as the adult figures, choreograph and dictate the dynamics of the household, the forces that operate in the total unit, and the influences that impinge on it.

On the surface, Bill and Sandy Apple and Gar and Fanny Church appear to be dichroic examples of a married couple. The Apples are a young, average, middle-class couple living in middle America, struggling to meet financial demands on Bill's moderate income. They are passably intelligent, but give no indication of being well-read or artistically inclined in any way. The Churches are quintessential aging New England Brahmins, with affluence and a high standing in society. Despite these mostly superficial yet vast differences in age, social standing, and background, the Apples and Churches bear some striking similarities -- similarities that establish them as abusers.

As noted in Chapter I, the abuse exhibited in these plays occurs on two levels--physical and psychological. The Apples are guilty of physical abuse, and Fanny Church of inflicting psychological abuse.

The physical abuse in *Birth and After Birth* is made obvious by Howe. In two separate incidents, the child Nicky is beaten across the face by one of his parents. The first incident occurs relatively early in the action. After he destroys all of his mother's lovely party decorations, leaving a huge mess for her to clean up before the guests arrive, he starts vehemently demanding grape juice, and the result is physical abuse.

SANDY: I just don't understand you. One
minute you're the sweet baby Mommy
brought home from the hospital, and
the next, you're a savage!

NICKY (*Stamping his feet and whirling through
all the wrapping*): I want grape juice.

I want grape juice. I want grape juice!

SANDY: You don't care if Jeffrey and Mia walk
into a shit house! (*Starts cleaning again*)

NICKY (*Wailing*): *I'm going to die if I don't
have grape juice, and then you'll be sorry!*

SANDY: Well, you can't have grape juice. You'll
spoil your appetite for your birthday cake!

NICKY: I want grape juice. I want grape juice.
I want grape juice!

SANDY (*Slaps him hard with each word*): Mommy!
Said! No! (*Silence. Nicky makes a small
strangled sound*). (118)

The second incident, which occurs near the end of Act I,
involves Bill. Nicky again begins demanding some grape juice, so
Sandy shoves a glass of it into his hand and he promptly hurls it to

the floor, sending shattered glass everywhere. Still upset by his parents' refusal to let him make his birthday wish, Nicky "lunges headlong into the glass," wails, "Daddy hurt me. Daddy hurt me," and kicks Bill in the shins (134). This behavior prompts another outburst of violence and abuse, one that mirrors the episode involving Sandy earlier. Slugging Nicky with each word, Bill hollers, "*Don't . . . you . . . ever . . . hit . . . your . . . father!*" (At this point, it would be prudent to note that Nicky is played by an adult. The actors do not slap or slug a four-year-old child).

The characteristics of the physically abusive family, as defined by A. Toffler in his ground-breaking work Future Shock (1970), and reiterated and accepted by the vast majority of psychologists and psychiatrist, are the defining characteristics of Bill and Sandy Apple. In their comparisons of abusing and non-abusing parents, Dr. Blair and Dr. Rita Justice determined that "change, not economic or environmental stress, is the distinguishing factor" (26), and that the unpredictability of such changes creates stress and anger, which is then directed at the child or children. The Apples are indeed facing a time of great impending change. Bill is on the brink of losing his job because his superior has determined him guilty of "professional inconsistency." Sandy's change is physical.

Faced with the fact that she can have no more children, she begins to feel “old before her time.”

When I looked in the mirror this morning, I
saw an old lady. Not *old* old, just used up.
*(She scratches her head; a shower of sand
falls out)* It’s the weirdest thing, it doesn’t
look like dandruff or eczema, but more like . . .
I don’t know, like my head is leaking My
brains are drying up. *(Pulls out a fistful of
hair)* And now my hair, falling out by the roots.
(Scratching and shaking more sand) Poor Mommy,
when she looked in the mirror this morning, she
saw an old lady. (111)

Sandy’s physical disintegration (which is presented in a very surrealistic style) continues when, at the play’s end, she begins losing her teeth.

Another factor that weighs heavily in the abusive family is a dysfunctional symbiotic relationship. Normal symbiosis is exhibited when, for example, a mother awakens at her infant’s whimpers and gets up to feed, change, or in some way attend to his needs. Symbiosis is, in general, “experiencing a meeting of mutual shared

needs: the infant's need to be nurtured and the mother's (or father's) need to nurture. Dysfunctional symbiosis is the result of not terminating the symbiotic relationship when it has served its original purpose of sustaining life. This outcome is harmful to both the parent and the child. The child is kept from developing into a "whole person, from doing his own feeling, thinking, and acting" (Justice 70).

Failure on the part of the parent to end this relationship occurs because, through the child, the parent finds a need fulfilled. In his article "Paediatric implications of the battered baby syndrome," C.H. Kempe explains it like this:

Basic in the abuser's attitude . . . is the conviction, largely unconscious, that children exist in order to satisfy parental needs.

[Children] who do not satisfy these needs should be punished It is as though the infant were looked to as a need satisfying parental object to fill the residual, unsatisfied, infantile needs of the parent or parents. (32)

Evidence of this mentality in Sandy is given on two occasions. The first occasion occurs when the exuberant Nicky, searching for his birthday gifts, discovers a box of masks. He puts one on; it's

the face of a baby. Sandy's is instantly and thoroughly enchanted: "Oh, Nickyyyyyyyyyyyy! . . . Does Nicky want to play Babies? (*Laughs*) . . . Sweet baby" (114-5). She begins recounting to her son the day he was born; how precious and sweet and wonderful everything seemed--especially him. Caught up in her exaggerated anecdotes and memories of a now lost-forever "perfect" child, she ignores the job-threatening letter Bill is attempting to share with her (at least until he grows extremely irate and storms out). Bill's angry exodus brings to an end her illusionary game of "Babies": her idealized past in which her son was what she envisions he should be, perfect and utterly dependent, instead of what he often is, demanding and destructive with a mind of his own. The last piece of this idealized memory-world is shattered when Nicky tears off his mask and screams for some grape juice. The "real" Nicky is back for Sandy to deal with.

Sandy also uses Nicky as an instrument through which she tries to impress her cousin Mia. As she and Nicky open his birthday cards, Sandy swells with pride at the fact that he received one from his teacher: "Will you look at this! Nicky got a card from Mrs. Tanner, his nursery school teacher, and they have a policy of not sending out individual cards on the children's birthdays. (*In a*

singsong) I guess someone is Mrs. Tanner's favorite!" (125) Later, the moment Mia and her husband Jeffrey arrive for the party, Sandy quickly shows Mia the card Nicky got from Mrs. Tanner, but as Mia points out, the handwriting places some doubt on the honored card's origins:

MIA (*Reading*): "Happy birthday, Nicky. Sincerely,
Mrs. Tanner."

SANDY (*To Nicky*): Mrs. Tanner sent that especially
to you, breaking all the school rules!

MIA (*Examining the card*): That's funny, this looks
like your handwriting . . . Her Y's and N's are
exactly like yours. (146)

In this instance, Nicky is used by his mother to satisfy her obvious need to impress a peer, even under false pretenses.

Birth and After Birth was Howe's first attempt at an examination of the "savagery" of family life, but the play was never produced. Her vision and ideas about the dark side of the American family were not presented to her audience, and so, a decade later, she returned to this same theme in *Painting Churches*. The success of *Museum* and *The Art of Dining* insured the play's production, and now theatergoers would have the opportunity to see Howe's

“grotesque cartoon of the loving American family,” albeit in a much less surrealistic version than *Birth and After Birth*. In *Painting Churches* Howe abandons the “larger-than-life” actions of physical abuse she used with the Apples and delves into the more complex, less ocular issue of abuse of the psyche, which is, according to Garbarino and Vondra, the most destructive type of child abuse (26).

Because of the complexities of the information available, defining psychological maltreatment and identifying perpetrators of this form of abuse has not proven to be an easy thing for doctors and experts in the field. Opinions vary from one text to the next. But there are some basic commonalities agreed on by all, and Fanny Church, when assized by these agreed-upon characteristics, is the classic psychological abuser.

Psychological abuse is defined in The Psychologically Battered Child as “verbalizations . . . [which] jeopardize the development of self-esteem, of social competency, of the capacity for intimacy, of positive and health interpersonal relationships” (1). This definition coincides with that offered by S. Hart: “words spoken that aim directly at the heart, at the self, that torpedo the ego” (2). “When families, or a parent, send(s) destructive messages to children, [the behavior] enters the realm of psychological maltreatment”

(Coopersmith 20).

There is no question that Fanny Church is guilty of speaking such words. They occur with regularity throughout *Painting Churches*. The moment Mags arrives, in the family's initial reunion, nearly every line Fanny speaks to Mags is captious: "I told you not to bring a lot of stuff with you Don't get crumbs all over the floor I suppose that's what your arty friends in New York do . . . dye their hair all the colors of the rainbow" (176-7).

She continues with her undermining of Mags' self-esteem with her reaction to her daughter's news that she is to have a one-woman show at Castelli's in New York. This achievement is a tremendous one for a young painter, but Fanny, instead of being thrilled or congratulatory, as Gar is, turns the news of the girl's triumph into an anecdote about her own mother and manages to throw in a demeaning stab at Mags that is not in the least recondite. When she says that "no woman of breeding could be a professional artist in her day," it is obvious that the time when her mother painted is not the point; the point is that no well-bred, respectable lady would take up such an ignominious vocation at any time.

In Scene II, Fanny's belittlement of her daughter continues:

Really, Mags, I've never seen anyone eat

as much as you. What's the matter, don't I feed you enough? . . . Just because you walk around looking like something the cat dragged in, doesn't mean Daddy and I want to, do we Gar? I've never seen you looking so forlorn. You'll never catch a husband looking that way. Those peculiar clothes, that God-awful hair. I don't see other girls walking around like you. I mean, girls from your background Before you know it, all the nice young men will be taken and then where will you be? All by yourself in that grim little apartment of yours with those peculiar clothes and that bright red hair. (195-6).

In this little tirade emerges another characteristic of psychological abuse: "disparaging comparisons with others" (Bowlby 37).

These understated but effective insults and affronts continue throughout the play, as Fanny seizes every opportunity that presents itself to take a "dig" at her daughter's ego. However, the true target of Fanny's disparagements is more often Mags' work and talent than

her appearance, and it is this constant depreciating of the thing most important in her life that hurts and damages Mags more than anything.

At no point in *Painting Churches* does Fanny show any pride in her daughter's abilities. She never encourages her or compliments her work in any way. On the contrary, her attitude about Mags' occupation as a portrait painter and her artist's lifestyle is completely condescending, and Fanny certainly never deigns to give Mags any credit or recognition.

Fanny's reaction to the news of Mags' show at Castelli's is only the first indication of her attitude about the girl's art. As Scene I draws to a close, the audience is again given an example of Fanny's indifference to what Mags is achieving when she refers to her daughter's job at the "wretched art school . . . Pratt, Platt, whatever," the whole time yelling at Gar until Mags can hardly bear it.

In the second act, the audience learns of a past incident in which Fanny denied Mags her moment of glory. At her first important show, Mags had been humiliated by her mother's completely uncouth and boisterous conduct. To emphasize how ambivalent she is to Mags' feelings, Howe uses the element of

exaggeration to describe Fanny's actions. Almost anyone can imagine their mother behaving embarrassingly, as Fanny did, but not to such a degree. It is the superlative example of Fanny's need to belittle and diminish her daughter.

The catalyst for Mags' relating the story is Fanny's remark that her daughter's portraits "aren't ridiculous! They may not be all that one *hopes* for, but . . ." (Howe *Painting Churches* 189). At this show, Fanny, wearing a ridiculous hat, immediately gathered a crowd with her outburst, "MY GOD, WHAT'S MILLICENT CROWNINSHIELD DOING HERE?" Mags had included a portrait of her neighbor which her mother criticized harshly.

I GREW UP WITH HER. SHE LIVES RIGHT
DOWN THE STREET FROM US IN BOSTON.
BUT IT'S A VERY POOR LIKENESS, IF YOU
ASK ME! HER NOSE ISN'T NEARLY THAT
LARGE AND SHE DOESN'T HAVE SOMETHING
QUEER GROWING OUT OF HER CHIN! THE
CROWNINSHIELDS ARE REALLY QUITE GOOD-
LOOKING, STUFFY, BUT GOOD-LOOKING
NONETHELESS! . . . HOLD EVERYTHING!
I'VE GOT A PHOTOGRAPH OF HER RIGHT

HERE, THEN YOU CAN SEE WHAT SHE
 REALLY LOOKS LIKE! (190-1)

Adding insult to injury, it so happened that Fanny had “latched on to *the* most important critic in the city” and was “trumpeting” her remarks for him as she “hailed him over to the painting” (191).

The reason Mags has come home, other than to help her parents move, is to paint a portrait of them while they are still in their beloved home. Painting this picture is extremely important to Mags, but Fanny never takes it seriously. When Mags first mentions deciding on the appropriate pose, location, backdrop, lighting, and clothes Fanny and Gar should wear, Fanny becomes disrespectfully capricious and child-like, squealing “LET’S DRESS UP! LET’S DRESS UP!” (183). She immediately draws her husband into this puerile behavior, and as they giggle and act silly, Mags’ pleas that they stop fall on deaf ears. “Mummy, please, it’s not a game! Mummy?!” (183). It is Gar, and not Fanny, who finally quits and settles down.

Mags second attempt to find the perfect pose for her parents occurs just after the retelling of the Millicent Crowninshield portrait fiasco. Instead of offering any type of apology for behavior that obviously humiliated her daughter deeply, or trying to understand how much painting this portrait means to Mags, Fanny

once again launches into her infantile behavior and draws the ever-accommodating Gar into her game. During this little exhibition -- as her parents strike poses from such famous paintings as Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, and Michelangelo's *Pieta* and *The Creation* -- Mags shouts out, "THREE CHEERS . . . VERY GOOD . . . NICELY DONE, NICELY DONE!" (191). It can be argued that this outburst indicates Mags enjoys her parents behaving like this and is anxious to join in on the fun. However, considering all the facets of this scene, the only possible conclusion is that the girl is being sarcastic and bitter, or that she knows from experience the futility of trying to stop her mother once this game has begun and, being defeated, has no choice but to let the gamut be run. Only moments later, after completely recounting her humiliation from the next room, she reenters, looks right at her parents and says, "This was my first show" (192). By having this line delivered in such a manner, Howe leaves no doubt that Mags was not "joining in on the fun" earlier, but is indeed resentful and hurt.

Fanny's reaction to Mags' desire to paint a portrait moves beyond the negative verbal assaults associated with psychological abuse into the patterns of destructive behavior set forth by Garbarino, Guttman, and Seeley. The patterns take on five forms--

rejecting, isolating, ignoring, terrorizing, and corrupting. Few psychological abusers engage in all five of these patterns; the abuse is usually a combination of two or more. In Fanny Church we have four. The only destructive pattern she is not guilty of is that of corrupting. Two of them have already been examined: rejecting, which is defined as “refusal to acknowledge the child’s worth and the legitimacy of the child’s needs,” and ignoring, “deprivation by the adult of essential responsiveness” (8).

The true depth of the extent of Fanny’s abuse is revealed when Mags confronts her parents with something that happened years before and shaped the rest of her life. Because Fanny and Gar initially have trouble remembering the incident, it is clear that this is Mags first time to feel courageous enough to bring it up to them. It seems that, when she was nine, she was banished from eating at the table for six months because she spit her food out through her teeth. To be banished for half a year is, without question, severe punishment for so harmless an offense, and the fact that Fanny doesn’t even remember it only solidifies the theory that she deprived her child emotionally. As the anecdote begins, Fanny is only perplexed and rather innocent:

FANNY: We sent you from the dinner table?

MAGS: I was banished for six months.

FANNY: You *were*? . . . How extraordinary!

MAGS: Yes, it *was* rather extraordinary!

FANNY: But why?

MAGS: Because I played with my food.

FANNY: You did? (200)

But as she begins to recall the thing, she can't deny it and so she becomes completely defensive and angry, screaming at Mags, "I SAID THAT'S ENOUGH!" (201)

After having been banished, Mags went to her room and found that some crayons had melted on the radiator. She was so delighted with the way they looked that she melted some more.

We find out that Mags lost a great deal of weight during her banishment. She "looked like a scarecrow what with the bags under [her] eyes" (203) and Fanny never noticed. Here we have a direct example of the fact that Fanny could be unbearably cruel to her child. It could even be that Fanny did notice that Mags was starving herself and simply allowed the situation to continue. When Mags relates how her crayon melting period ended, with her mother taking a blowtorch to her creation, she describes the way Fanny looked: "I just have this memory of you standing over my bed, your hair

streaming around your face, aiming this flamethrower,” screaming “IT’S GOT TO BE DESTROYED!” (203). Mags is describing this scene from a child-hood memory. Although her now grown-up mind might see it from a different perspective, the visual remembrance of it would be from a child’s point-of-view; and in Mags’ child eyes, Fanny was a witch-like figure with fire blazing forth and streaming hair who destroyed her beautiful “masterpiece.” For a little girl to see her mother in such a manner shows how impossible it was for Mags to turn to Fanny for any emotional nurturing.

As she finishes the story, she is indeed triumphant this time as she crows, “I FOUND MY OWN MATERIALS!” But the hard fought emotional victory exhausts her and she exits struggling and weak, muttering, “You see, I had . . . I mean, I *have* abilities . . . I have abilities. I have . . . strong abilities. I have . . . very strong abilities. They are very strong . . . very, very strong . . .” (204). This telling account of how Mags first found her artistic abilities, coupled with her parents “selective memories of the same incident, . . . becomes an incisive paradigm of the missed connections that have haunted this family for a lifetime” (Rich, C16).

With this story the audience gets not only another example of rejecting and ignoring on the part of Fanny, but of isolating and

terrorizing. By banishing Mags to her room for six months, Fanny “cuts the child off from normal social experiences and makes the child believe she is alone in the world” (Garbarino Battered Child 8), in other words, isolating. Terrorizing includes not only frightening the child, as Fanny did when she came in with the blowtorch, but also “physical attacks on the victim’s most beloved possessions” (Walker 3).

Walker also points out that quarreling parents are a staple in the abusive home, and Fanny and Gar certainly have their share. In Act II, Howe shows us the couple packing--and arguing.

FANNY: What about this gruesome old
thing? (*Holds up a ratty overcoat*)

GARDNER: God . . . remember these shoes?
Pound gave them to me when he came
back from Italy. I remember it vividly.

FANNY: *Do* let me give it to the thrift shop!
(*She stuffs the coat into the appropriate
carton*)

GARDNER: He bought them for me in Rome.
Said he couldn’t resist; bought himself
a pair too since we both wore the same

size. God, I miss him! (*Pause*) HEY, WHAT
ARE YOU DOING WITH MY OVERCOAT?!

FANNY: Darling, it's threadbare!

GADRNER: But that's my overcoat! (*He grabs
it out of the carton*) I've been wearing
it every day for the past thirty-five years!

FANNY: That's just my point: it's had
it I trust you remember that
the cottage is an eighth the size of
this place and you simply won't have
room for half this stuff! (*She holds
up a sports jacket*) This dreary
old jacket, for instance. You've had
it since Hector was a pup! . . . And
this God-awful hat ! (192-3)

Later, near the play's end, Howe again shows us Gar and Fanny
arguing. This time, however, things become quite heated and
violence rears its ugly head.

GARDNER: Look, I don't want you messing
around with my--

FANNY *enters with an armful of papers,*

which she drops into an empty carton.

GARDNER: HEY, WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?! . . .

SEE HERE, YOU CAN'T MANHANDLE MY
THINGS THIS WAY!

FANNY (*Offstage*): IF IT WERE UP TO YOU,
WE'D NEVER GET OUT OF HERE!
WE'RE UNDER A TIME LIMIT, GARDNER.
KITTY'S PICKING US UP IN TWO DAYS . . .
TWO . . . DAYS!

*(She enters with a larger batch of papers and
heads for the carton)*

GARDNER (*Grabbing Fanny's wrist*): NOW,
HOLD IT! JUST . . . HOLD IT RIGHT
THERE!

FANNY: OOOOOWWWWWWWWWW!

GARDNER: I PACK MY THINGS!

FANNY: LET GO, YOU'RE HURTING ME!

GARDNER: THAT'S MY MANUSCRIPT! GIVE IT
TO ME!

FANNY (*Lifting the papers high over her
head*): I'M IN CHARGE OF THIS MOVE,

GARDNER! WE'VE GOT TO GET CRACKING!

GARDNER: I said . . . GIVE IT TO ME!

MAGS: Come on, Mum, let him have it.

GARDNER (*Finally wrenches the pages from*

Fanny): LET. . . ME . . . HAVE IT! . . .

THAT'S MORE LIKE IT!

FANNY (*Soft and weepy*): You see what he's

like? . . . I try and help with his packing

and what does he do . . . ?

GARDNER (*Returns with another armload*):

SEE THAT? . . . NO SIGN OF CHAPTER

ONE OR TWO . . . (*He flings it all down
on the floor*)

FANNY: Gardner . . . PLEASE?!!

GARDNER (*Kicking through the mess*):

I TURN MY BACK FOR ONE MINUTE

AND WHAT HAPPENS? . . . MY ENTIRE

STUDY IS TORN APART! (*He exits*)

MAGS: Oh, Daddy . . . don't . . . please . . .

Daddy . . . please?!

GARDNER (*Returns with a new batch of*

*papers, which he tosses up into
the air): THROWN OUT! . . .THE BEST
PART IS THROWN OUT! . . .lost*

(He starts to exit again)

MAGS *(Reads one of the fragments to
steady herself):*

"I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,
Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paperweight,
All the misery of manila folders and mucilage . . ."

(213-215)

When examining an abusive parent, it is important to look not only at how they abuse, but why. As is true with reaching a universally accepted definition of psychological abuse, experts also have not been able to come up with an across-the-board, definitive list of reasons why people engage in such behavior. The complexities and multifaceted dimensions of the human psyche make such a thing virtually impossible. However there are commonalities found in nearly all psychologically abusive parents that experts agree on, two of which are the need to control and jealousy.

As has been show in the examples given above, Fanny does have an aggressive, controlling personality. This trait is not uncommon

in mother-child relationships. The behavior of 50% to 60% of mothers of children up to ten years of age is intended to exert a control function (Mash 221) and is absolutely normal. Mothers must assert control over children in order to teach, guide, and nurture. The problems arise when, like Fanny, mothers are overly assertive to the point of suppression of development and when the control is not relinquished to the child, at least by the time he or she reaches puberty.

The key to all of the problems between the two women lie in one place: the jealousy they feel towards one another. In her article "Feminine Focus," Judith E. Barlow picks up on this fact but attributes the jealousy only to Fanny. "Wife of a prizewinning poet and mother of a professional painter, Fanny harbors the non-artist's jealousy of the successful creator. There is something ludicrous and sad in Fanny's amateur masterpiece, a picture of Venice pasted to a lamp shade, the bulb shining through pin-pricks and cutout windows" (244). While this statement is entirely probable, it seems a little inconclusive to stop the explanation there. The jealousy between Mags and her mother is multifaceted, not one dimensional, and the heart of it lies in Gardner.

A fundamental characteristic of the psychologically abusive

parent, jealousy usually centers around the relationship the child has with the other parent. Oftentimes, an intense closeness between a father and his daughter will ignite feelings of jealousy in the mother. Such is the case with Fanny Church.

Howe is quick to establish the poignant affection that Mags and Gar share. Mags' return to her Boston home also immediately discloses the vast differences in her relationship with each parent. She is ecstatic to see Gar, hugging him tightly and commenting on his handsomeness. For Fanny, there is only a wave and a brief, awkward embrace--one which Mags quickly pulls away from to help Gar with the luggage. Her partiality for her father is promptly established. When Mags informs her parents that she is to have a one-woman art show at Castelli's. Gar is congratulatory and thrilled for his daughter.

Just as Fanny's insults and biting comments reverberate throughout *Painting Churches*, so do Gar's compliments and encouragement. It is only natural, then, that Mags should feel so drawn to her father. In fact, the jealousy Fanny feels is also felt by her daughter. Because he is always the loving, complimentary, nurturing parent, it stands to reason that Mags has always felt love for him as she never has for her mother. Since she is an only child with no

siblings to turn to, and because her father completely represents love and fulfillment, it seems likely that Mags' adoration of him extends beyond the realm of normal father/daughter relationships. When she was a child, he would have meant everything to her and she would do anything to please him. To risk losing her only true loved one would have been an impossibility for Mags. Without him and his devotion to her, where would she turn? Therefore it is logical that her feelings for him are, indeed, exceedingly strong. Because the bond between father and daughter is so strong, and because she is a selfish woman, it is not unreasonable to say that Fanny is jealous. Although Gar is Fanny's husband, Mags is the one to whom he constantly gives attention and affection. It is to his daughter he gives what his wife wants for herself.

This jealousy also gives Mags the courage to do for her father what she generally can not do for herself: defend him against Fanny's put-downs and indifference. When mother and daughter are alone for the first time, Fanny begins to tell Mags how Gar is becoming increasingly "gaga" and, through the entire conversation, Mags is completely resistant to the idea, ending the scene in complete denial: "I hate when you do this. There's nothing wrong with him! He's just as sane as the next man. Even saner, if you ask me" (180).

Near the play's end, in Act II, Scene I, Mags again lashes out at her mother for Fanny's cold-hearted, humiliating treatment of Gar. Fanny informs Mags that Gar is now incontinent, and the fact that she laughs at her husband's heartbreaking problem sends Mags into a rage.

FANNY: He's incontinent now, too.

He wets his pants, in case you haven't noticed. *(She starts laughing)* You're not laughing. Don't you think it's funny? Daddy needs diapers .

MAGS: STOP IT!

FANNY: It means we can't go out anymore.

I mean, what would people say . . .?

MAGS: Stop it. Just stop it.

FANNY: My poet laureate can't hold it in!

(She laughs harder)

MAGS: That's enough . . .STOP IT . . .Mummy . . .

I beg of you . . .*please stop it!*

GARDNER *enters with a book and indeed a large stain has blossomed on his trousers. He plucks it away from his leg.*

FANNY (*Pointing at it*): See that? See? . . .

He just did it again! (*Goes into a
shower of laughter*)

MAGS (*Looks, turns away*): SHUT . . . UP! . . .

(*Building to a howl*) WILL YOU PLEASE

JUST . . . SHUT. . . UP! I don't

believe you! How you can laugh at him?!

FANNY: I'm sorry, I wish I could stop, but

there's really nothing else to do.

Look at him . . . just . . . look at him . . . !

MAGS: It's so cruel You're so . . .

incredibly cruel to him I mean,

YOUR DISDAIN REALLY TAKES MY BREATH

AWAY! YOU'RE IN A CLASS BY YOUR-

SELF WHEN IS COMES TO HUMILIATION! (216-7)

These words are spilling out of one who knows Fanny's capacity for humiliating intimately. Mags still sees her mother much as she did the night her crayon creation was destroyed--as a cruel and scornful witch.

In presenting these two dysfunctional families, Howe gives a compelling picture of the behaviors of abusive parents and the

causes that lie behind their actions. More importantly, though, she shows her audience the effects of that abuse in the characters of the children: Nicky Apple and Mags Church.

CHAPTER III
NICKY AND MAGS:
PROFILES OF ABUSED CHILDREN

Birth and After Birth's four-year-old Nicky Apple, and *Painting Churches'* grown-up Mags are both victims of abuse. Nicky is subjected to harsh physical abuse, while Mags suffers from the psychological maltreatment of her mother. With these two victims the abuse is different, but the effects are very much the same.

In both of these plays, Howe shows us some of the effects of abuse: "masking," which is the need of the child to hide his or her true self from the outside world because of low self-esteem; attempts on the part of the child to gain some form of control; and self-mutilation.

In young Nicky we only see the beginnings of these types of defensive, self-preserving behaviors. They have not yet become defining characteristics of his personality, as is the case with Mags, but they are there. In *Birth and After Birth*, the masking, the attempt to gain control, and the self-mutilation are shown in three

separate incidents. The masking occurs in a scene already discussed in Chapter II, the scene in which Nicky puts on the baby mask and not only ends his mother's sullenness and disappointment over the fact that he has destroyed all her lovely decorations, but also gains total acceptance.

Nicky seeks control with a game of "Rabbit Says." Claiming that he woke up with white fur on his hands, Nicky dubs himself "Rabbit Boy" and demands, "*Let's play Rabbit Says.*" The game begins charmingly enough, but soon turns obscene and scatological and increasingly ridiculous:

Rabbit says, "Raise your hands!" (*Sandy and Bill raise their hands*) Rabbit says, "Scratch your nose." (*Sandy and Bill scratch their noses*) Rabbit says, "Lift your right leg." (*Sandy and Bill do everything he says*) Rabbit says, "Lift your left leg." Rabbit says, "Stick out your tongue." *Reach for the sky!* (*Sandy and Bill do all these things; Nicky laughs, claps his hands*) I tricked you. I tricked you! Rabbit says, "Rub your belly." Rabbit says, "Hop on two feet." *Hop on one foot!* (*Sandy and Bill do*) You did it! You

did it! (*The game gets faster*) Rabbit says,
 “Lie on the floor.” Rabbit says, “Get up.” Rabbit
 says, “Fart.” (*Bill makes a farting noise in
 his armpit*). (123-4)

Not yet old enough to understand that this is indeed just a game, Nicky’s four-year-old mind perceives his parents actions as indicators that he is, for the moment, in control.

Self-mutilation by the child occurs in the scene alluded to in the previous chapter in which he hurls his glass of grape juice to the floor, sending shattered glass everywhere, and the “lunges headlong into the glass” (134).

As noted above, these isolated incidents are little more than highly suggestive indicators that Nicky is suffering from abuse. In Mags the indicators have fully developed into core components of who she is. Also, because they are now fundamental elements of her psychic make-up, they do not appear in isolated incidents one at a time, but instead correlate and overlap.

In only his second line, Gar says, “Mags is back from the nut-house” (170). The initial interpretation, obviously, is that he is referring to New York City and is not to be taken literally. But, viewed in retrospect, this line easily takes on a second conno-

tation; Gar is aware, either on a conscious or subconscious level, that Mags does have emotional problems. In this case, “nuthouse” acts as a double entendre.

In Act I, Scene III, we learn that the true appeal for Mags of painting portraits lies not so much in the creative process, but that it is the perfect way to “mask” herself. In this scene we have Mags revealing her low self-esteem, referring to herself as awkward and plain. This debased self-image is rammed home when she describes what it’s like to paint a portrait:

You can be as plain as a pitchfork, as
inarticulate as mud, but it doesn’t matter
because you’re completely concealed:
your body, your face, your intentions.
Just as you make your most intimate move,
throw open your soul . . . they stretch and
yawn, remembering the dog has to be let
out at five . . . To be so invisible while so
enthralled . . . it takes your breath away!
That’s why I’ve always wanted to paint you,
to see if I’m up to it. (199)

This situation is perfect for Mags. She feels intimacy with

her posers, so that that basic human need is filled, but it is a strictly hands-off, one-way bonding, and Mags is safe from the dangers of pain: “the subject is revealed while the artist remains anonymous” (Barlow 245). She says a little later that painting her parents is “quite a risk.” The risk is that, in the safest and most fulfilling way she has yet discovered, Mags is going to put herself in an intimate situation with her parents, but this time it will be on her terms, in her world -- not theirs. In a sense it will be as it always has been; she will be there -- but invisible. Mags will use her art as a kind of inanimate procurator; she will go through it in an attempt to gain the approval always denied her. However, this time she is going to be in control, not her mother.

The true scope of the deeply-rooted emotional scars suffered by Mags are truly brought to light in the story of her six-month banishment. It is important to note that Mags didn’t just spit her food out in a random, disorderly manner, but squirted it out “in long runny ribbons . . . They were quite colorful, actually; decorative almost. She made the most intricate designs. They looked rather like small, moist Oriental rugs . . .” (201). The reason Mags formed her food into such neat curlicues was because she was afraid of making a mess at the table.

I couldn't swallow anything. My throat just closed up. I don't know, I must have been afraid of choking or something I guess I was afraid of making a mess. I don't know; you were awfully strict about table manners. I was always afraid of losing control. What if i started to choke and began spitting up over everything . . . ? I was really terrified about making a mess; you always got so mad whenever I spilled. If I just got everything in neat little curlicues beforehand; you see . . . I thought it was quite ingenious, but you didn't see it that way. You finally sent me from the table with, "When you're ready to eat like a human being, you can come back and join us!" . . . So, it was off to my room with a tray. But I couldn't seem to eat there either. I mean, it was so strange settling down to dinner in my *bedroom* . . . So I just flushed everything down the toilet and sat on my bed listening to you: clinkity-

clink, clatter clatter, slurp, slurp . . . (201-2)

Not eating is one of the means Mags employed to gain a feeling of control. The need to gain control is the motivating factor behind the eating disorders of many young girls. Bridget Dolan and Inez Gitzinger, in their book Why Women? Gender issues and eating disorders, state it thusly: “A common theme with these girls and women is the feeling they have lost control of their lives in some sense following an unwanted experience or experiences and the eating disorder permits them some sense of regained control” (102).

Even more horrifying than Mags’ eating disorder is the comfort she finds in self-mutilation. In creating her crayon “masterpiece” on the radiator, Mags burnt her fingers; but instead of jerking her hand away in pain, she kept on pressing the crayons down, whispering to herself, “ ‘Mags, if you let go of this crayon, you’ll be run over by a truck on Newberry Street, so help you God!’ . . . So I pressed down harder, my fingers steaming and blistering . . . Once I’d melted one, I was hooked! I finished off my entire supply in one night . . . I’d never felt such an exhilaration!” (202). Here it is made unquestionably clear that Mags not only suffers from emotional problems, but that they run deep. Self-mutilation by a child is an obvious indication that something is very, very wrong. Michael D.

Figueroa, in his article “A Dynamic Taxonomy of Self-Destructive Behavior,” points out that self-mutilation is often a “misdirection of attention from the internally focused affect to an externally focused sensation [which] provides a sense of control” (282). With such an overbearing and commanding mother, it is understandable why Mags would seek out a “sense of control,” despite the pain it may have caused. And, as is suggested by Figueroa, the external pain may have been (and probably was) preferable to the internal.

Happily, if not ironically, for Mags, this excruciatingly painful experience of abuse, isolation, starvation, and self-mutilation did end on a positive note: she found her own materials and realized her artistic potential.

CHAPTER IV

LOVE ABOVE ALL

In *Birth and After Birth* and *Painting Churches*, Howe has delved into the savagery of families, but she has also presented those moments of “excruiating tenderness” she refers to in Moore’s book. Therefore, an examination of these two plays that does not acknowledge this aspect of the families’ relationships would be inaccurate and incomplete. Bill and Sandy can not honestly be portrayed as unloving, unconcerned parents, nor can Fanny.

The entire action of *Birth and After Birth* centers around Nicky’s fourth birthday party. Sandy and Bill work extremely hard to make his party and presents as wonderful as they can. It would be unfair to say that Sandy’s only motivation in forging a card from Nicky’s teacher, Mrs. Tanner, was to impress Mia. She also used it as a means of making her son feel especially good on his birthday. Positive interaction between the Apples and their son makes up the majority of the dialogue and action of the play, and in the final scene after Jeffrey and Mia make their exit, and the audience is left with just the three members of the Apple family again, their final

image of this important occasion includes no fighting, no impatience, no violence, no demands--just a loving family all together, preparing to watch a home video.

BILL (*Starts clapping in anticipation*) : Hey,
Nicky!

NICKY (*Imitating Bill*) : Hey, Daddy!

BILL (*Clapping*) : Hey, Sandy!

NICKY (*Imitating*) : Hey, Mommy!

SANDY (*Dreamy*) : Nick on his fourth birthday . . .
my Nicky . . .

BILL (*Clapping joyously*) : *Four years old!*

NICKY (*Throws his arms around Sandy and Bill*) : Look! Look! Look! Look!
(They freeze in an endless embrace)

SANDY: Four years ago today, you made us the
happiest family in the world!

(The curtain slowly falls)

Fanny also can't be portrayed as totally evil. At the close of Act II, Scene II, she reveals that she, too, has had her share of mental anguish and that, like Mags, she does truly love Gar.

Paint us?! . . . What about opening

your eyes and really *seeing* us? . . .

Noticing what's going on around here
for a change! It's all over for Daddy
and me. This is it! "*Finita la commedia!*" . . .

All I'm trying to do is exit with a little
flourish; have some fun What's so
terrible about that? . . . It can get
pretty grim around here, in case you
haven't noticed . . . Daddy, tap-tap-tap-
ping out his nonsense all day; me traips-
ing around to the thrift shops trying
to amuse myself He never keeps me
company anymore, never takes me out
anywhere . . . I'd put a bullet through my
head in a minute, but then who'd look
after him? . . . What do you think we're
moving to the cottage for . . .? So I can
watch him like a hawk and make sure he
doesn't get lost. Do you think that's
anything to look forward to? Being
Daddy's nursemaid out in the middle

of nowhere? I'd much rather stay here
in Boston with the few friends I have
left, but you can't always do what you
want in this world! (219)

Like its predecessor, *Painting Churches* leaves the audience with a final image of love, happiness and reconciliation. The despondency and despair of the whole play at times seems insurmountable, but Howe never leaves her audience without hope. That all of the Churches love one another is never questioned, and it is this love that they're all trying to preserve. Whatever kind of battles they may be fighting, whatever kind of horrible things may have happened in the past, their ultimate goal--for themselves and for each other--is peace.

With the end of the war in sight, the final maneuver begins: Mags shows her portrait to her parents. At first she is beside herself, begging them not to look. Through years of conditioning, she has learned that her mother's reaction will be negative and to open herself up to such a thing is frightening. And indeed, Fanny does react quite negatively. At first she is furious because Mags has painted her just as Mags sometimes see her--an ugly apparition: "I think it's perfectly dreadful! What on earth did you do to my face?"

Since when do I have purple skin?!" (224-5). But Mags loves her mother and so has not created a likeness that is all bad. She has given the portrait some very pretty qualities, too, so that it is an image simultaneously ugly and beautiful--just as Mags has both ugly and beautiful feelings for her mother. When Fanny notices that Gar thinks the picture is pretty, she immediately suggests to him that she looks young. When she realizes that they like the painting, Mags also wins a victory, she has not failed her own test as she previously believed; and now, just like her parents who are on the threshold of a new life, she too can begin to heal from the injuries of the past and begin anew.

The play is ultimately, although subtly, optimistic. Everyone gets something that they not only want, but that they desperately need: Mags passes her own test and can now begin to really put the past aside and start a whole a fresh life and career; Fanny is now going to have Gar all to herself; and all three of them are confident that the love between them is and will remain strong. Despite that fact that, in many ways, the Churches are a dysfunctional family, they do all love each other; and Howe ends the play with Gar and Fanny dancing and Mags moved to happy tears.

What Howe says about this final scene could easily be applied

to the final scene in *Birth and After Birth*. “I think it’s one of those transcendent moments. It’s as if they’re stopping time. They’re caught there It lasts for one heartbeat, and then is gone. We all know it’s a purely theatrical moment, which is why it’s so precious” (Betsko and Koenig, 232).

Birth and After Birth and *Painting Churches* are two very different plays stylistically, but both are works in which Tina Howe examines the dark side of family life as well as the good points. To say that the latter play is little more than a realistic version of the earlier would be incorrect. *Birth and After Birth* is written from her experience as a mother as well as a daughter. That is the reason why the character of Nicky is played by an adult; the play was written, in part, “for the suburban woman with no exit from her kitchen and a four-year-old seven feet tall” (Moore101). But many of the issues she brings up in *Birth and After Birth* are thoroughly “hashed out” in *Painting Churches*, indicating Howe’s need to redress them on a more substantial level and, possibly, to settle those issues from her life in her own heart and mind.

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