

Modern Poetry

To My Mother by George Barker

George Granville Barker (26 February 1913 – 27 October 1991) was an English poet and author. In his early twenties, Barker had already been published by T. S. Eliot at Faber and Faber, who also helped him to gain appointment as Professor of English Literature in 1939 at Tohoku University (Sendai, Miyagi, Japan). He left there in 1940 due to the hostilities, but wrote *Pacific Sonnets* during his tenure. From the late 1960s until his death, he lived in Itteringham, Norfolk, with his wife Elspeth Barker, the novelist. In 1969, he published the poem *At Thurgarton Church*, the village of Thurgarton being a few miles from Itteringham.

An Introduction to the theme

Father by Elaine Feinstein

The wood trade in his hands
At sixtyone back at the sawbench,
My stubborn father sands and planes
Birchwood for kitchen chairs.

All my childhood he was a rich man
Unguarded purchaser
Of salmon trout, off-season strawberries
And spring in Switzerland.

Bully to prudish aunts
Whose niggard habits taught them to assess
Honest advantage, without rhetoric:
His belly laughter overbore their tutting.

Still boss of his own shop
He labours in the chippings without grudge
Loading the heavy tables,
Shabby and powerful as an old bus.

How does Feinstein portray the parent-child relationship in *Father*?

The speaker is clearly in awe of her father.

- She describes him as a "bully" to her "prudish aunts" as his "belly laughter overbore their tutting". The father is seen to not just go against the advice of these "niggard" relatives, but to simply overwhelm them with his hearty, larger-than-life laughter.
- She describes his generosity toward her as him being "a rich man...unguarded purchaser" of luxuries such as Swiss vacations, trout.
- These over-the-top descriptions of her father's extravagance in both gifts and gestures betray the fact that as a child, her father was to her a dominating, awe-inspiring giant in her life.
- It explains why, even in his advanced age (of 61), she describes him as being "shabby" yet "powerful as an old bus", still reassuringly imposing and reliable to his now grown-up daughter.

Creative Campus: Learning with Latitude
Literary Appreciation and Stimulus Response Question

Modern Poetry

To My Mother by George Barker

To My Mother

Most near, most dear, most loved and most far¹,
Under the window where I often found her
Sitting as huge as Asia, seismic with laughter²,
Gin and chicken helpless³ in her Irish hand,

Irresistible as Rabelais⁴, but most tender for
The lame dogs and hurt birds that surround her -
She is a procession no one can follow after
But be like a little dog following a brass band.

She will not glance up at the bomber, or condescend⁵
To drop her gin and scuttle to a cellar⁶,
But lean on the mahogany⁷ table like a mountain⁸
Whom only faith can move, and so I send
O all my faith, and all my love to tell her
That she will move from mourning into morning⁹.

Literary Appreciation

1. The poem is something of an introduction on the part of the poet. What first impressions does Barker give us of his relationship with his mother in the first and second stanzas?

1. The initial impression is that there is a very affectionate bond between mother and son, despite their physical estrangement.

- He describes her as "most near, most dear, most loved". It is clear that as his mother their bond is close, as is to be expected in a conventional mother-son relationship.
- However, the use of "and most far" at the end of the first line strikes a jarring note in our reading of the stanza. This reveals that the mother and son are separated by distance.
- The fact the poet continues to describe his mother in such fond tones - describing her as 'irresistible' - highlights his unusually strong affection for her which has not been dulled or muted by their time spent apart.

¹ "Far" is a contrasting turn of phrase here.

² Compares his mother and her laughter to a large landmass/continent and its tremors.

³ Illustrates the powerful, almost giant-like quality of the mother. Implies she is a larger-than-life character.

⁴ Rabelais: Writer, famous for descriptions of an 'eat, drink and be merry' lifestyle

⁵ For the mother this is an issue of pride, dignity.

⁶ Cellar is underground - this is a play on the word "descend".

⁷ Conveys an impression of solidity, impervious nature.

⁸ Immovable nature of the mother - implies both her stubbornness and imposing nature.

⁹ Play on words - mourning/morning. Morning also symbolizes the dawn of hope as well as the literal daylight and end of the night bombing raids.

Creative Campus: Learning with Latitude
Literary Appreciation and Stimulus Response Question

Modern Poetry

***To My Mother* by George Barker**

2. To Barker, his mother dominates his imagination by the sheer force of her personality.
- Described to be "huge as Asia, seismic with laughter", he likens his mother to a large continental landmass, and her mirth so hearty, it resembles an earthquake.
 - The habits of his mother also embody this same principle. Described to be leading the same 'irresistible' lifestyle as Rabelais, she does not just consume but overpowers her diet of "gin and chicken" which are rendered "helpless in her Irish hand".
 - The exaggerated nature of her actions as described by Barker make it clear that the impression she has left upon her son is a deep one. She is clearly a forceful personality.
 - Overall it is clear that his mother is large not just in person but also in character - someone larger than life whom Barker lives in awe of.

2. Why does Barker describe his mother to be "like a mountain"?

1. The comparison to a mountain is an allusion to the pride of his mother.
- His mother will neither 'glance up' nor 'condescend to...scuttle to a cellar' in the face of a bomber's threat. In fact she refuses to go so far as to 'drop her gin'.
 - The image of a mountain as a landmass soaring high above the land is firstly a direct allusion to her act of defiance in staying above ground.
 - "condescend" is a play on the act of descending into a safe haven below ground (where the bombs cannot reach) and in describing his mother as a mountain Barker highlights his mother's courage in refusing to seek shelter and staying above ground in defiance.
2. The image of a mountain as a large, rocky landmass highlights the stubborn streak his mother has.
- There is nothing rational about staying at the table drinking gin in the midst of a bombing raid--this is pointless defiance, an empty gesture in the face of a hated foe.
 - The immovable nature of a mountain is thus testament to his mother's stubborn streak, just as the mountain is a permanent feature of the landscape, she refuses to let the threat of enemy bombing shift her from her seat.
 - As such, it is clear the image of a mountain is a device for Barker to highlight, in an exaggerated manner, the stubborn courage of his mother.

3. Discuss the significance of the poet's urging that his mother "will move from mourning into morning".

1. The play on words here is a message of consolation from the poet.
- The mention of "the bomber" combined with the mention of his mother being in 'mourning' suggests the mother is bereaved as a result of losing a loved one to the same conflict the bomber is a part of.
 - This likely explains her gesture of defiance against the bombing raid, one born of grief and emotional trauma.
 - Bombing raids are typically carried out at night - thus the mood here is one of darkness in both environment and emotion.
 - As such the poet's urging that the mother will transition into 'morning' is both an assurance that the bombing raids will soon pass, as well as a message of condolence and hope with regard to her grieving for deceased family members. "Morning" and the sunrise it brings serve as an indirect reference to the dawning of hope.