

# De Idylle voorbij : verbeelding van moederschap in Nederlandse literatuur 1980 tot 2010.

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# Summary

Motherhood seems to be anything but a pleasurable experience in contemporary Dutch literature. Many novels about motherhood published in the past three decades focus on mothers in problematic situations. They depict mothers who lose control and go off the rails. Some of these mothers even batter, misuse, or murder their own children. Motherhood seems to be a terrible and severe ordeal in current Dutch literary fiction. It seems that on the whole mostly female authors publish such novels. Renate Dorrestein is known for writing fiction about disrupted families, as are Hannes Meinkema, Vonne Van der Meer, Saskia Noort, and Maya Rasker. Several of these authors seem to prefer pre-modern genres and elements in their depiction of motherhood.

In contrast to this literary preference for problematizing motherhood, contemporary Dutch society has a tendency to idealize motherhood in quite a normative manner. Motherhood is considered a conscious choice and it is generally believed that the practice of mothering can be molded, changed and controlled as one sees fit. In this context, mothers are *expected* to enjoy motherhood. It should be fun, as it is no longer something which just happens to women. It is determined by choice and an experience over which women have control. This particular image of motherhood has become prominent in the Netherlands since the 1980s. Due to the coercive presence of this idyllic notion of motherhood, many mothers find it difficult to openly discuss less pleasant experiences and aspects of motherhood. This seems to be taboo. However, since the 1980s Dutch novels have taken a different trajectory: they have focused on mothers who do not, or cannot, live up to this modern ideal.

The tension that results from this contrast is the central subject matter of this dissertation. The main research question is how literary representations of motherhood relate to the normative social ideal mentioned above. The current study mostly deals with the way in which Dutch literature represents motherhood in relation to this social construction of rosy-spectacled motherhood. I am referring to consciously chosen, white, middle-class motherhood in the context of a heterosexual nuclear family with young children. Do these novels criticize this norm? Do they initiate debates about this subject? Does Dutch literature produce new or alternative images of motherhood in the process, or is the norm of enjoyment (re)produced? In answering these questions, this thesis centers on original Dutch fiction from the period 1980-2010.

Literature is demarcated broadly in this study: it includes all novels and novellas that can be considered literature according to their Nederlandse Uniforme Rubriek-

sindelings-code (Dutch Uniform Classification-code) also known as NUR-code. Literature is considered an integral part of society, as an imaginative force that partly informs our idea of motherhood. It is the social function of literature, which is analyzed here. That is why the literary school *New Historicism*, in particular the work of Jane Tompkins (1985, 1993) serves as the theoretical background to this study. Following Tompkins (1985, 1993) I will argue that novels can perform 'cultural work'. Tompkins uses this concept to refer to the way in which literature reflects on society, "defining certain aspects of a social reality which their authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions" (1985, p. 200). In doing so, literature can work to undermine existing social norms, but it can also confirm and reproduce them, and/or introduce new norms. Tompkins (1985) is mainly interested in the meanings that have (most likely) been attributed to novels by critics and readers. This study also takes an interest in the cultural work of literature. It is, however, not chiefly concerned with the meanings that readers and critics have assigned to novels. Although the reception of literature will be discussed, it is the disentanglement of the potential meanings of the novels themselves which is central to this book. This dissertation explores what is called the cultural work *potential* of novels. This term is also introduced to give voice to the fact that a researcher inevitably plays a part in the meanings that can be assigned to texts. By interpreting literary and non-literary texts from the vantage point of particular questions about motherhood, one does after all activate a specific part of their cultural potential. As such, they are in fact *put* to work in a particular manner.

In order to analyze the cultural work potential of literature about motherhood, methods from the sociology of literature and different methods of textual interpretation of novels are combined in an innovative manner. This thesis contains a quantitative analysis of the production of novels on motherhood, and an in-depth structuralist, intertextual interpretation of four well-known novels on motherhood by female authors. Two of them deal with unwanted childlessness: *De reis naar het kind* (The journey to the child, 1989) by Vonne van der Meer, and *Nieuwe burens* (New neighbours, 2006) by Saskia Noort. The other two centre on infanticide: *Een hart van steen* (A heart of stone, 1998) by Renate Dorrestein, and *Met onbekende bestemming* (Unknown destination, 2000) by Maya Rasker. In the interpretation of these four novels ample attention is given to aspects of genre, as knowledge of the way in which particular genres are mobilized helps me to evaluate the relationship of the novels with its social context(s), for instance the effects of pre- and anti-modern genres in these novels. It is particularly interesting to examine what kind of work these genres can do potentially, as they contrast with the modern signature of the social idealization of motherhood. Fatherhood also receives attention throughout this study, as the meanings we tend to assign to motherhood are often tied up with the way we look at fatherhood, and vice versa.

In order to explore how literature relates to the modern polished image of motherhood, it is necessary to examine the idealization of motherhood over the past thirty years. The first chapter contains such a historical analysis. The dominant presence and the coercive character of today's idyllic image of motherhood is ascertained through a discussion of the representation of motherhood in educational self help books for parents, in commercial glossy magazines for women, in popular educational magazines for parents, and in advertisements and other promotional activities for baby products. For this discussion mostly sociological research on motherhood is used. This is complemented with a new analysis of, amongst others, the glossy Dutch magazine for parents *Ouders van nu*, and advertizing practices of Prénatal Moeder en Kind BV, the largest Dutch specialized store for pregnant women, mothers and their babies, and Maxi Cosi, a Dutch brand of car safety seats that are distributed world wide. In addition, the historical emergence and development of the modern hedonistic outlook on motherhood is embedded into larger social developments in the Netherlands.

This research shows that the current rosy-spectacled discourse of motherhood emerged at the beginning of the 1970s and has become dominant since the 1980s. It consists of the tacit assumption that the ideal mother is white and that she does not work full-time. In addition, she is believed to belong to the middle class; she has made a conscious choice to have children; and she is a member of a nuclear family household with young, healthy children. The relationship with her young children is symbiotic. Mothers who do not meet this implied typification, are not necessarily expected to enjoy their motherhood. It is, however, different for a mother who does: she is supposed to be blissfully happy because she is a mother. If she does experience any unpleasantness in this position, she is expected to call upon professional services that enable her to become happy after all. Thus, the idyllic discourse of motherhood emphasizes that white, middle class, consciously chosen motherhood in the context of a heterosexual, nuclear family with young and healthy children is a manageable and therefore pleasurable experience. Enjoyment is central to it. The normative character of what I henceforth call the 'discourse of enjoyment' becomes particularly visible when it is disrupted; when one cannot live up to it. A few of the larger social, historical developments, which provide fertile soil for the present rosy-spectacled notion of motherhood are: the emergence of a hedonistic life style, a modern notion of subjectivity, and a dominant outlook on life in Western societies, called the 'psychology of choice', which is grounded in the idea that happiness results from the right choices in life, and that one has control over one's life and luck.

This research demonstrates that the sources under discussion, as well as Dutch society as a whole, do not display motherhood monolithically. There are social, political, and scientific spaces in which negative aspects of motherhood are articulated. Many of these negative images, however, seem to strengthen the white,

middle class, heterosexual character of the discourse of enjoyment 'ex negativo', as they usually revolve around types of motherhood, which are non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-middle class. Dominant ideas about the mothering practices of migrant women are, for instance, rather negative. Their motherhood is often problematized in political and public debates. The same is true for lesbian mothers or mothers from the 'lower' socio-economic classes. Still, negative representations of white, middle class, heterosexual, and consciously chosen motherhood also exist. However, many of these also seem to be dictated by the normative ideal. The discussion of problems is, for example, not completely absent from educational self help books and magazines, but they are depicted as relatively easy to manage. The overall gist of the argument remains sanguine: it may not be going well now, but there is no cause for worry. Motherhood will be a happy affair in no time, provided that you make the right choices. The normative influence of the idyllic discourse can thus even be felt in cases in which problematic sides of motherhood are brought into the limelight.

My discussion of various types of representations of motherhood simultaneously shows that representations of fatherhood are still relatively scarce in Dutch society. Some of the sources under discussion contain indications that fatherhood is on the verge of representation by the end of the research period, that is 2010. Still, the invisibility of fathers in educational self help books, magazines, and advertorials is striking. What becomes clear as well is that the types of idealizations of motherhood and fatherhood differ. The combination of a (nearly) full-time career and fatherhood is for instance generally depicted as enriching, while the same combination is generally viewed as wearing out mothers.

Several important hypotheses about Dutch literature on motherhood are put to the test in chapter 2. This chapter is empirical in nature, following the institutional analyses of the production of literature by sociologists of literature such as Pierre Bourdieu (1994) and Susanne Janssen (1994, 1997, 1998, 1999). With the help of descriptive statistics, it maps the production of Dutch fictional novels and novellas on parenthood between January 1 1980 and December 31 2009. The abstracts and reviews of fictional novels and novellas on parenthood in the Nederlandse Centrale Catalogus (Dutch Central Catalogue) or NCC are analyzed. This database contains descriptions of nearly every book published in the Netherlands with an ISBN-number. The total number of works which could be inventoried is 549. Of these, 148 were explicitly related to motherhood. Both sets of books were analysed separately. By taking all fictional prose on parenthood on board, the net is thus cast wider in this chapter than in the remainder of this book, which is limited to literary work in which motherhood is the most central topic. By also paying attention to works on fatherhood in this second chapter, it becomes possible to gain an insight into the larger prosaic context of which books on motherhood are part. Moreover, the em-

irical analysis is not restricted to literary works of fictions. Other fictional genres for adults are included as well to obtain a better impression of the relative position of the literary genres that depict motherhood and parenthood. The NUR serves as a guideline for a demarcation of the different types of genres. The NUR-genres 'litteraire roman, nouvelle' ('literary novel, novella') and the 'streek- en familieromans' ('regional novels and family sagas') turn out to be largest genres by far. This is valid for works on parenthood in general, as for books on motherhood.

The major objective of this chapter is to find out whether motherhood in literary fiction is mainly depicted in relation to problems. There are strong indications that this is indeed the case. A thorough examination of the NCC-abstracts and reviews of the 148 works on motherhood reveals that motherhood is problematized in the majority of these books, namely 91,2%, regardless of their NUR-genre. This is no different for the largest literary genre, the 'literary novel/novella': motherhood is depicted as problematic in 89,9% of the 99 works in this genre. This representational tendency is not limited to books on motherhood, but extends to works on parenthood, and henceforth also fatherhood. In 90,0% of the 549 books under discussion parenthood is not depicted as a rosy affair. It can thus be concluded that Dutch, fictional prose is generally a domain in which parenthood, and motherhood, is systematically linked to misfortune. The descriptions of the novels and novellas show furthermore that there are recurrent themes which emerge in these works, such as the death and/or illness of a parent, the absence of a parent, single parenthood, religion, adoptive parenthood, foster parenthood and step parenthood, war, and pregnancies and children (born) out of wedlock.

Secondly, this second chapter aims to provide insight into the gender of the authors who write on parenthood and motherhood. Literary criticism has claimed that mainly female authors write about these subjects, but the opposite position has been taken as well. An analysis of the gender of the writers of the novels and novellas on parenthood in general and motherhood in particular indicates that female authors outnumber male authors: 59,9% of the 549 works on parenthood have female authors and 68,2% of the 148 books on motherhood were written by women. Of the largest literary genre of the books on motherhood - the 'literary novel/novelle' - 60,6% was written by women. These percentages are comparatively large, as women in general tend to produce a much smaller part of fiction in the Netherlands than men. Research has shown that in 1987 the percentage of fictional prose published by women was, for instance, only 27,0%, and in 1995 it was 29,0% (Van Rees, Janssen & Verboord, 2006).

Finally, this chapter aims to achieve a first impression of the cultural scope of fictional prose on parenthood and motherhood, and of literary fiction on motherhood in particular. This was done through a quantitative analysis of the exposure of the books that have been published from 1995 onwards, in five Dutch newspapers: *Algemeen Dagblad*, *de Volkskrant*, *Het Parool*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *Trouw*. In addi-

tion, the influence of the gender of the author on the exposure in the newspapers is analyzed. In debates about the attention given to and appreciation of female and male authors it is still claimed that women structurally receive less media attention than men. I examine whether this holds for fictional prose on parenthood and motherhood in the five newspapers mentioned above. With that, attention is paid to the influence of the NUR-genre of a book on its exposure. The analysis shows, first of all, that 43,1% of all prose on parenthood is mentioned in one of the newspapers ( $n = 343$ ). This turns out to be 51,0% ( $n = 96$ ) for the works on motherhood. The gender of the author does not seem to affect the exposure books on parenthood receive, but genre does. 'Literary novels/nouvelles' are mentioned more frequently in newspapers than 'regional novels and family sagas'. There is, though, a strong indication for a connection between the *number* of times a book on parenthood is mentioned in the newspapers and the gender of the author. Men have the advantage here. Their books are cited far more frequently than those written by women. As far as the books on motherhood are concerned, little can be said about the possible connections between sex, genre and exposure because of the few books that could be taken into account. Although a direct relationship between media exposure and the gender of the author could not always be found, it might still be the case that gender indirectly influences the exposure of fictional prose on parenthood and motherhood in the newspapers under scrutiny.

The quantitative analysis in this chapter limits possible answers to the questions that are central to this book. First, the analysis seems to provide an incomplete image of the themes that are dealt with in prose on motherhood. Infanticide, for example, was not a topic in the abstracts and reviews, while several literary critics and literary scholars have pointed at this theme in contemporary prose on motherhood. Moreover, they feel that books on this topic are important and telling in light of the existence of a rosy picture of motherhood in Dutch society. In addition, the NUR-genre of 'litteraire thriller' ('literary thriller') is absent in my inventory of the NUR-genres. This is striking, considering that this genre has been connected to parenthood and family life by critics. One of the most important restrictions is, however, that barely anything can be said about the relationship between the prose under analysis and the discourse of enjoyment. The abstracts and reviews in the NCC are hardly indicative of such a relationship. That is why in-depth interpretations of novels themselves are needed. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 contain these interpretations.

Chapter 3 explains in more detail the relation between the sociology of literature and the practice of interpreting novels, the selection of the four case studies, and the method used in interpreting them. I argue that quantitative methods from literary sociology and the methods used to interpret novels share an interpretative quality. Moreover, I suggest that these methods complement each other in this

research. The largely quantitative analysis of the production of literature makes it possible to gain insight into trends in the literary field enabling me to test some of the research assumptions of chapter 2. It also makes it possible to situate the four individual case studies and their meanings in a larger context. The interpretations of those cases make it in turn possible to study the cultural work potential of novels vis à vis the social context.

The selection of the novels under analysis has been largely determined by their central theme: white, middle class, heterosexual, consciously chosen motherhood in a nuclear family. As mentioned before, although infanticide does not appear as a topic in the NCC abstracts and reviews, literary scholars and critics have explicitly connected novels about infanticide with the rosy-spectacled norm of motherhood. There seems to be a strained relationship between these books and this particular social norm, which makes them highly interesting cases. *Een hart van steen* (Dorrestein, 1998) and *Met onbekende bestemming* (Rasker, 2000) were selected for this reason. This also holds for the two novels on unwanted childlessness. The authors of these novels and literary critics have associated *De reis naar het kind* (Van der Meer, 1989) and *Nieuwe buren* (Noort, 2006) with certain elements of the discourse of enjoyment on motherhood. Unwanted childlessness was, for that matter, revealed as a recurring, albeit inconspicuous, theme in the quantitative analysis of the NCC- abstracts and reviews. Narrations about unwanted childlessness do not only depict an (unfulfilled) desire to have a child, but also frequently represent ideas about the desired object - motherhood - itself. The question what it means to be a mother becomes pressing after all when it is difficult to fulfill one's longing for a child. All four novels are by female writers and, thus, they are representative of the gender distinction mentioned in chapter 2. Another selection criterion has to do with genre: these novels are literary fiction for adults according to their NUR-codes. Three of them are 'literary novels/nouvelles'. These are *De reis naar het kind* (Van der Meer, 1989), *Een hart van steen* (Dorrestein, 1998) and *Met onbekende bestemming* (Rasker, 2000). They belong to the largest NUR-genre that was revealed in the quantitative analysis of prose on motherhood in the NCC. *Nieuwe buren* (Noort, 2006) is a 'literary thriller', a genre which was strikingly absent from my analysis in chapter 2. The selection of *Nieuwe buren* (Noort, 2006) is complementary to this analysis. Another reason for assessing *Nieuwe buren* is the scarcity of interpretative research on Dutch thriller novels. In addition, these novels were chosen because they have had a large cultural scope. They have been read and reviewed both inside and outside the Netherlands. Finally, selecting novels on unwanted childlessness and infanticide means that a choice was made for works of fiction that potentially contain alternative representations of motherhood. Representations which differ from those foregrounded by the discourse of enjoyment. Unwanted childlessness is an experience which sits uneasy with the notion that we can simply choose to have children and that motherhood is a manageable affair. That a mother who kills her

child presents an extremely disturbing, cultural image of motherhood that seems to be at odds with a hedonistic outlook, is self-evident. Selecting novels about such themes was done in a conscious effort to compensate the normative influence of the discourse of enjoyment. As such, this dissertation is in keeping with gender studies, which provides insight into the cultural construction of gender. The goal of which is to produce knowledge, which makes it possible to call inequalities between both men and women into question.

Attention to intertextuality and the structure of the novels are pivotal ingredients of the method of interpretation used in this dissertation. The latter gives ample attention to genre-aspects of the four novels, letting go of the strict use of the NUR-genres. More specifically, the method is based on Maaïke Meijer's (1996a) notion of intertextuality, and structuralist narratology as developed by Mieke Bal (2007, 1980).

Chapter 4 contains the analysis of *De reis naar het kind* (1989) by Vonne Van der Meer. In this novel Julia and Max, who are unable to have children, try to adopt a child via illegal means. The plot takes a rather absurd turn, as the tormented Julia and Max adopt an old man, Pablo, instead of a baby. *De reis naar het kind* (Van der Meer, 1989) counters a hedonistic outlook on the mother-child relationship, and the idea that we are free to choose if and when to have children. Instead the novel pleads for a type of motherhood that includes greater self-sacrifice. In addition, the book can be read as a critical exploration of intercontinental adoption. As such, the novel foregrounds the agony, pain and despair that can be caused by being childless by default, as well as of having to raise a child in poverty. This cultural work potential is activated when the novel is approached as a fairy tale. An approach legitimized by the interplay of several intertextual references in the novel. These concern amongst others the pre-modern genre of the fairy tale, the fantastic travel story *Gulliver's travels* by Jonathan Swift, Orson Welles, the Bible passage *Solomon's Wisdom*, and Miguel Hernández's poems.

The 'literary thriller' *Nieuwe buren* (2006) by Saskia Noort is analyzed in chapter 5. The central theme of this novel is Peter and Eva's unfulfilled longing for a child. More importantly, the novel deals with the lethal consequences of the couple's, and particularly Eva's, quest for a child. *Nieuwe buren* (Noort, 2006) relates to the discourse of enjoyment in a contradictory manner. On the one hand, the modern, idyllic image of family life and motherhood is subverted in a thriller-esque way. However, the novel can also invite a reading that leaves crucial parts of this picture in place. This ambivalence is the result of the genres mobilized: the male and female version of the a-heroic crime novel and the homely gothic novel. Although they give the book a thrilling quality, they may also make the novel's criticism of modern family life more superficial. This is possibly due to the fact that the genres mobilized

in the book are not pre-modern, although they can help to introduce archaic elements.

*Een hart van steen* (1998) by Renate Dorrestein is discussed in chapter 6. Margje van Bommel, the novel's main character, massacres nearly her entire family after the birth of her fifth child Ida in 1972 and then commits suicide. Only 12-year old Ellen and her little brother Michiel have a narrow escape and survive. Twenty-five years later, Ellen, now pregnant, discloses this tragic family history. The novel is interspersed with intertextual references to the genre of the homely gothic novel, to Greek tragedy and Christianity. The use of gothic elements undermines the modern image of the autonomous, rational, self-restrained subject. References to Greek tragedy introduce an outlook on fate that diverges from the modern belief in the manipulability of our lives. This holds for the references to Christianity as well. All in all, the novel produces a range of meanings that can erode the idealized modern norm of motherhood that is immersed in modern ideas about subject, choice and manipulability. This is mainly the result of the introduction of anti- and pre-modern genres and discourses, of which the Greek tragedy is the most important one. There are, however, limits to this disrupting potential of the novel. These limits are partly drawn by the reproduction of the medical-psychological discourse on postpartum depression.

*Met onbekende bestemming* (2000) by Maya Rasker is at the heart of chapter 7. This novel focuses on the struggle of Raya Mira Salomon, who is a writer by profession, with her newly acquired status as a mother. This finally culminates in her murder of her little daughter Lizzy on the morning of the latter's fifth birthday. Motherhood and fatherhood are represented in a relational manner, with the help of intertextual references to evolutionary-biological ideas about gender, and to gendered discourses on combining work and parenthood. My analysis shows that the interplay of these discourses generates different and even competing meanings. The novel does, however, question the idyllic picture of motherhood that is held up in contemporary educational self help books, magazines, and advertisements. For Raya kills her child, because she feels suffocated by the symbiotic type of motherhood that is prescribed by these sources. The novel's ambivalent character is enhanced by the overabundance of references to the genre of poetry. These concern explicit quotes from poems, as well as a poetic use of prose in the way Raya's history is told. In the end these references legitimize a reading in which a poststructuralist view on reality and language is called upon. That is how the novel makes a stand against the modern idealization of motherhood. The book can above all be read as a poem in itself, in which experiences of motherhood, fatherhood, infanticide, loss, and death are depicted in an indirect manner.

In my conclusion at the end of this dissertation I argue that the modern idea of enjoyment, which surrounds motherhood nowadays, is questioned in a critical manner in all four novels. The coercive character of this discourse of enjoyment becomes visible in these books as well. As such, the structuralist, intertextual interpretations of the novels add to knowledge of the presence and the functioning of the hedonistic perspective on motherhood.

The major result of this research is that pre-modern and/or anti-modern perspectives turn out to play a pivotal role in the undermining force of the novels. All books contain intertextual references to genres that open up pre-modern or anti-modern representations of motherhood. Van der Meer's novel contains intertextual references to the fairy tale, Noort refers to the a-heroic crime novel; we find references to the (homely) gothic novel in Noort (2006), Dorrestein (1998) and Rasker (2000); to Greek tragedies in Dorrestein (1998) and Rasker (2000), and poetry in Rasker's *Met onbekende bestemming* (2000). These references often, though not always, unlatch meanings, which make it possible to read the novels as critical commentaries on the modern discourse of enjoyment.

In addition, it is concluded that the combination of quantitative methods from literary sociology and methods that serve the interpretation of novels can be productive in a project that aims to unravel the cultural work potential of novels. The quantitative approach enabled us to map trends, to test some general assumptions about Dutch contemporary literature on motherhood, and helped us to situate the individual case studies. Structuralist, intertextual interpretation consequently made it possible to unravel in detail the way novels can work: the meanings they can produce, and how these relate to social developments. Moreover, through these interpretations it proved to be possible to put the novels at hand at work, in order to undercut the modern, normative idealization of motherhood.