Chapter Four

Quest to Overcome Loss and Loneliness

Stories written by Audrey Thomas tell about things happening to one, and the condition of that one, a person very much alone in the world. She is a child alone in an ugly and baffling world of adults; she is a North American woman alone in a bungalow in West Africa or in a museum in Mexico; she is a virgin far from home, bare naked in college dorm on the North Sea.

(Bowering, Snow 28)

The purpose of this chapter is to probe into the psyche of these lonely women that Bowering speaks of – women questing for love and in the process of trying to overcome their loneliness. Despite having an established sensibility and a feeling of self-assuredness, Thomas’ heroines also need warmth, company and human attachment. Her stories explore various facets of loneliness and how the women try to overcome it. She examines the lives of ordinary people, mostly women, under stress and explores their uniqueness with sensitivity and humour. All her characters are looking for affection, love and human connections. They see life as a means of survival in a world that is not always kind to the middle-aged and lonely. She sees the ridiculous in a moment of tragedy and allows to be more objective about one’s own small miseries. She presents islands of human separateness, empathizing with characters that are brave and able to cope, even though sometimes strangely.

Image of the lost, abandoned, unloved child unfolds throughout her stories through a series of dead babies and lost children. As Godard observes in “Audrey Thomas and her Works,” “Most of the stories record some form of loss, some fall from grace perceived through the veil of memory” (219). The story “If One Green Bottle . . .” centers on the
experience of miscarriage. It takes place entirely inside the consciousness of a woman who is in the last hour of her futile labour in a foreign hospital. Her perceptions are quite possibly distorted by the drugs she has been given and her mind dwells naturally on images of birth and death. In her pain and anxiety, the narrator protagonist seeks to identify with another woman’s experience: that of the Virgin Mary. She imagines Mary, mother of Christ, first at the Annunciation, where she fantasizes the Holy Ghost as a kind of Door-to-Door Salesman, and then at the birth itself. The figure of the Virgin Mary appears as a symbol of maternity, a uniquely female experience. Mary’s experience is neatly caught in a phrase that significantly registers the narrator’s loss: “After the immaculate conception . . . the maculate delivery” (TGB 5). This woman is waiting for “the flaming cross,” “the olive branch” (9), but all that she remembers is only the “six dead mice” (10) and the formaldehyde bottles of dead foetuses, death intermingled with birth. “Waiting anxiously” (15), she is “Noah” (9) hoping for the sign of a new covenant and forgiveness, some transcendent meaning. In her drugged state, she also identifies with Estragon in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot.

Echoing the memory of her father fishing, the narrator compares birth to fishing. She seems obsessed by the idea that once children are “caught” into life, “You cannot throw them back” (Mrs. Blood 183). The unborn embryo, like an undersized trout, can be disposed of, but in that case it is “thrown back not to thrive and grow but to become nothing” (183). Her concern over ‘throwing back’ the unborn child looks forward to her impending miscarriage.

“If One Green Bottle . . . ,” is a story of a childbirth that produces ‘nothing.’ As Di Brandt posits, birth is “one of the most amazing and magical moments in human experience, and it belongs, in the case of adults, exclusively to women who become mothers” (8). When
this experience turns to nothing, Thomas’ women protagonists find it difficult to come to terms with the loss and the resulting emptiness.

The baby, her potential for life is lost. Her physical emptiness is now generalized to her perception of the spiritual emptiness. The dead child is such a reality to her that she is at the height of her psychological breakdown and self-disassociation following an abortion. She cannot accept that the fetus is taken away and disposed of, to become “nothing, an excrescence” (Mrs. Blood 183). The dead infant is described as “A Something in a silver bowl. A Nothing” (219). She rebels against giving birth to “this nothing” (TGB13), and wonders “what do they do with it afterward . . . where will they take it? I have no experience in these matters” (TGB 9). Yet, even in the supposedly more ‘primitive’ atmosphere of Africa, the clinical attitude prevails, and the fetus simply disappears. The narrator of the story thinks of human fetuses stored in bottles on laboratory shelves, to be used for research or teaching purposes, and wonders if this same fate will befall her infant. Indeed, the story’s narrator imagines a male professor using her fetus to teach his class – which is unsympathetic to the woman’s need to deal with what has happened to her child. The mother never finds out what happened to the infant; there are no ceremonies or rituals to help her through her grief. One is, presumably, supposed to act as though the whole thing has never happened. The dead infant underlines the nameless protagonist’s sense of loss, of a real death and grief. And it points out the fact that the fetus is simply disposed of as garbage. This act of discarding the dead child, which denies life, death, and grief, is responsible for much of the narrator’s loss.

In this story Thomas explores pregnancy, a specifically feminine concern. The protagonist suffers an abortion at an indistinct time in her past. This causes her mental pain which she succinctly tucks away, but which resurfaces when she goes through a miscarriage,
an event which is coloured linguistically by intense physical pain. (Literally, the death of her unborn child; figuratively, the death of the self). The narrator’s identity is unclear throughout much of the story and her stream-of-consciousness narration questions her sanity. The text is entirely composed of fragments, as is the psyche of the emotionally scarred woman. Thomas’ women often journey from apparent resolutions to radical questioning and loss of certainty. So to suggest this tale of a woman’s disintegration, this fragmentary form is used.

The fragmented narrative, liberally sprinkled with ellipses, is filled with the kind of literary allusions, puns, and etymological explorations. Both overtly, through the narrator’s thoughts, and indirectly through its technique, the story deals with the struggles of the protagonist to overcome the loss of her unborn child. As the story follows the meanderings of a woman’s mind, past and present mingle, and in the ellipses which break into the text on every line, the waves of her pain, and the waves of memory is sensed:

Waves of pain now . . . positive whitecaps . . . breakers . . . Useless to try to remember . . . to look behind . . . to think. Swim for shore. Ignore the ringing in the ears . . . the eyes half blind with water . . . the waves breaking over the head. Just keep swimming . . . keep moving forward . . . rely on instinct . . . your sense of direction . . . don’t look back or forward . . . (TGB 11)

For Thomas, already, memory is a painful act, one which the human swimming tries to avoid in order to make progress; still, it is as inevitable as ‘instinct’ and source of ‘direction’ for Thomas’ characters as the act of breathing and walking. It is fitting, then, that Thomas herself should navigate as a writer by coming to terms again and again with memory; as she has revealed, “If One Green Bottle . . .” was written out of the intensely painful personal memory of the miscarriage she suffered in Ghana.
The narrator comes to terms with herself through pain, loneliness, fear and guilt. Flashback reconstructs most of her past built up by shifts from present to past and driftings in the stream of semi-consciousness. Concluding in still birth, the brutal memory of an earlier abortion and silence, the story’s final gaps and negations suggest the loss of both her language making power and her potential for life. The ebb and flow of blood emphasizes the ebb and flow of woman’s discourse. “If One Green Bottle . . .” is an unusual story: the prose style conveys the controlled hysteria of the narrator, balanced against her need for an almost ruthless exposure of her ‘self.’

The experience of maternity, first taken up in this story, is one Audrey Thomas continues to explore throughout her writing, and, that experience is often one of “failed maternity -- a miscarriage or an abortion” (Amussen 63). Abortion is a common image found in her stories. Abortion, perhaps even more than miscarriage, is an experience women find difficult to write or speak about, a loss which they find it very difficult to overcome. Rachel, the protagonist of “The More Little Mummy in the World,” is a North American woman travelling alone in Mexico. As she visits a Mexican cemetery and a mummy museum, she recalls her love affair which has just ended and the abortion she has recently had. The abortion appears to have been her own choice; she reflects that “It was as though once she had decided she didn’t want it he had washed his hands of the whole affair” (L&E 140). Like the word ‘mummy,’ the word ‘affair’ here implies another level of meaning. Her lover washed his hands not just of her pregnancy but also of the entire relationship, a loss which the protagonist finds difficult to bear with.

Abortion becomes the catalyst to the final break-up of the relationship. Rachel’s lover treats her with almost unbelievable callousness when he brings her home from the hospital,
ignoring her pain and nausea as she leaves the hospital, and asking her when they get home to “rustle ...up some dinner” for himself and his sons before they leave on their camping trip (L&E 145).

Rachel’s reaction to “The more little mummy in the world” (145) is reminiscent of the narrator of “If One Green Bottle . . .” thinking of human fetuses stored in laboratory bottles. The infant or fetus on display is depersonalized, turned into an object to be studied or stared at, and this is difficult for the woman who has just lost her child to accept. But Rachel cannot communicate any of this to the man who does not understand her, and so she is reduced to silence: “She wrote him letter after letter and tore them all up” (144).

The postcard she buys at the mummy museum – apparently bearing the picture of “The more little mummy in the world” – provides a means for her to communicate with her ex-lover. She plans to write the standard postcard message – “Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here” (146). This time-worn cliché is open to a number of possible interpretations, and the picture on the postcard, along with the history of the relationship, will ensure that the phrase conveys a number of different messages for both the sender and the receiver. Rachel is able to break her silence by subverting a traditional means of communication, although, in an ending typical of Audrey Thomas’ short stories, it is not told whether the postcard is ever actually written and mailed. For Thomas’ heroines, the act of sending is more important than whether men receive their messages, for in sending these messages women write themselves into story, naming their experience makes them real. In these live births as in the tragic miscarriages of the other stories, blood remains a key element of the experience, an emblem of all the pain the woman endures and the joy she feels.
Many of Thomas’ protagonists contemplate on the prospect of undergoing an abortion, or have already undergone one. Corrine in “Breeders” muses over having an abortion as she is unmarried and also she is underage. Whichever way she thinks – having the baby or having the abortion – it makes her feel sick. Her fear of undergoing an abortion disturbs her and gets reflected in her dreams. She has shifting dreams that fades once she wakes up.

Audrey Thomas’ stories, beginning with “If One Green Bottle . . . ,” are attempts to write the female experience, the author’s own experience, of childbirth. Miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion are frequent themes in these stories, partly because these “parodies” of the birth experience, as Thomas has called them (Bowering, Songs 15), have often been neglected in literature and Thomas obviously felt a need, both on her own behalf and on that of other women, to write about such events. Such non-births are also appropriate topics because the woman’s labour does not produce the expected, socially acceptable result, the child. The emphasis thus shifts from the product of birth to the often-ignored process of birth. Although in later stories Thomas’ writing shifts away from the experience of childbirth and the loss of it, the emphasis on women’s struggle to overcome their loss and the loneliness caused by it continues.

Thomas also emphasizes the hovering, nightmarish presence of the past over the life of her heroines in some stories. In “Still Life with Flowers,” the nameless protagonist tries to overcome the loss of a man who was once her lover. The story records all that goes on in her mind when she comes to know of his death. When she receives a phone call saying that the funeral is to be held the next day, she contemplates within her mind whether or not to attend the funeral. She is a sort of person who hates to put up a “cinematic show of grief” for the sake
of public gesture (TGB 16). Even if she attends the funeral it is not going to give comfort either to her or to the dead man. She even thinks of the possibility of not going and sending just a few flowers and a card expressing her deep sympathy. Later, she mediates of the problems that she will have to face if she attends the funeral. She has to arrange for a baby sitter to take care of her child. As it was already ten past ten, the baby sitter would have probably slept and she doesn’t want to disturb her.

Her lover’s death also brings her the memories of the death of her sixth grade teacher and leaves her completely perturbed. Finally, she imposes on herself the ordeal of a journey to California to face her lover’s death. She feels a sinking to minus-one, the body and absence of the loved one, of course, and her own loneliness among those others attending the funeral. Her secret and her secret detachment make her feel like an uninvited guest at a party. The others in the car she rides to the graveyard are school fellows, but have in this present moment become strangers.

What may appear at first to be a third-person narrative, is in fact a curiously constructed record of two voices, where the narrator refers to herself sometimes as ‘I’ and sometimes as a third person she observes. A kind of distancing occurs during the recollection. This process is used as a means of protecting against pain, as the protagonist distances herself from painful encounters with death by speaking of both ‘I’ and ‘she’. “If One Green Bottle . . .” and “Still Life with Flowers” detail the thoughts of a woman during two events at which time stands still and proves itself: a miscarried childbirth, and the funeral of a college friend and secret lover.

To recover a lost past, Audrey Thomas makes use of myth in her lyrical short story “The Man with Clam Eyes,” a story of a woman who has been deserted by her husband.
Unable to overcome the pangs of the breakup, the protagonist retreats nearby a sea. She rents a cabin from one of her old professors. He leaves the cabin to the protagonist as he wishes to go far away and “look at something” (GHGL 17).

That her heart is broken has been recorded and repeated throughout the story.

I came to the sea because my heart was broken . . . I came to this house because my heart was broken . . . How can I have slept when my heart is broken? . . . How can I laugh when my heart is cracked like a dropped plate? . . . How can I be hungry when my heart is broken? . . . How will I fall asleep when my heart is broken? (17-21)

Her husband’s desertion pushes her to the extent of feeling completely undesirable that makes her think that even the spiders and mice disapproved of her arrival to the cabin, by clicking their tongues and recording their dislike for her. She feels completely unwanted.

The sound of the wind and the waves that recurs in the story also denotes the mental disturbance that she goes through because of the separation. She finds even the wind heavy and distressing as it “grieved around the door” (17). She recalls her husband’s last words, which has caused her all this pain: “There is no nice way of saying this . . . Let’s not go over it again” (18). In her distress she tears the bottom of the skirt and tries to stuff the cracks of the cabin.

Just like the crack in the cabin, which in the beginning was noted to be spotless and shipshape, she felt a crack in her heart caused by her husband’s separation. In her miserable state, she even considers leaving the cabin and to go lie outside her husband’s door calling “whoo – whoo – whoo like the wind . . .” (18). She feels like an empty glove, waiting to be
filled up. To forget her sorrow, caused by her loneliness she drinks all of the wine in a bottle, without the help of which she couldn’t fall asleep.

The rest of the story is in the form of a dream. Audrey Thomas employs this strategy to make the woman protagonist overcome her loss caused by loneliness. What she is unable to do in real life, she imagines herself doing it in her dreams. She dreams of herself as a child eating ripe figs with her fingers from a banquet table under green trees. She visualizes herself opening the door where she hears similar sounds of west-coast birds and the waves. She envisions several islands, as if her island has spawned islands in the night. Although the sun is shining very brightly, she feels very much lonely.

Her loneliness pursues her even in her dreams. She desperately wants to write a message and throw it out to sea. So she rinses her wine bottle from last night and sets it above the stove to dry. She sits at the table thinking of the message to put in that bottle. She wants her message to be clear and yet compelling, just like a lamp lit in a window on a dark night. She opines that if it had been a fairy tale, there would have been someone to help her, “give her a ring, a cloak, a magic word” (19). But life is unlike a fairy tale. So in her frustration, she bangs the table, out of which a small drawer pops open.

The only thing in the drawer is part of a manuscript containing a story of a man on a train from Genoa to Rome. This man has a gun in his pocket and is going to Rome to kill his wife. While on train, he goes to the lavatory, locks the door, takes out the gun and stares at himself in the mirror. He is pleased to note that his eyes are “clear and clam” (19). Reading this out of the manuscript, it takes a while for the protagonist to understand what has really happened. She laughs at the typo made by the professor and later corrects it.
However, this gives her a clear picture of what to say in her message. She writes her message in a piece of paper, pushes it inside the dried wine bottle and closes it with a wax sealed cork. Having done all this, she decides to wait until dusk. Waiting by near the sea, she sees men come by in a boat with a pirate flag to dive for sea urchins. When they see the protagonist sitting on the rocks, they give one to her, a beautiful maroon sea urchin that resembled the lips of certain black men she had known. Not wanting to eat it, she sits there watching the sea urchin for a while passing away the time in pleasant idleness. Later she takes it to her cabin and lets it to skate back and forth across the table. She keeps it wet with water from her bucket. Before supper she puts the urchin back into the sea.

At night, when the moon comes out leaving a long trail of silver stretching almost to the rocks, she trims the wick, lights the lamp and sets it in the window. Holding the corked bottle she goes down the sea as far as she can go and flings it towards the sea. She imagines a hand reaching up and catching it as it fell back towards the sea. Standing there in the sea, she feels as if the moonlight and starlight have lighted up her loneliness.

The next morning she sees somebody on the rocks raising his arm and beckoning her. He was half-man, half-fish, with green scales glittering like sequins in the winter sunlight. Speaking with a strong Spanish accent, he tells her that he is a drowned sailor who went overboard in a storm at sea. Sitting on the rocks and combing out her hair, she feels her heart darting here and there like a frightened fish. Still she goes out with him to dive together and rises out of the sea, gleaming. He decorates her hair with clamshells and stars and her body with sea-lettuce. She does not feel the cold. She is very happy that she skips in the moonlight with a rope of giant kelp that he gives her. Later, they break open the shells of mussels and drink its liquid which tastes like tears.
As it is impossible for the man to come to her cabin, he asks her to go with him into the sea. He lifts her like a wave and carries her towards the water. She feels the roll of the world and her legs dissolve at his touch. He consoles her as the last portions of her body begin to shift and change. She then dives beneath the sea and clasps on to him. Believing him completely when he says that they are going to swim to the edges of the world, she takes one last glance backwards and waves to the woman sitting all alone with a lamp in the window.

The heartbroken woman who retreats to a cabin by the sea, inexplicably, becomes a mermaid to overcome her loneliness. “The Man with Clam Eyes” thus offers consolation, as the reason for being by the ocean, the loss or heartbreak, shifts into a question about whether the ‘break’ is as irreparable as it at first seems, and then the loss shifts, again, into a gain: of an imaginary explorer-lover, “a drowned sailor” (134), a merman.

“Ascension” is a story very similar to “The Man with Clam Eyes”. Here too the protagonist, Christine, is a lonely woman who goes to an island to overcome the loneliness caused by her husband’s desertion. While the unnamed protagonist in “The Man with Clam Eyes” overcomes her loneliness by imagining herself a mermaid, Christine overcomes it by developing a bond of friendship with Mrs. Fotula Papoutsia, an ageing Greek immigrant.

Although it has been a year since Christine’s husband, Michael, has left her, she finds it hard to overcome the pain of it. She finds it very difficult even to fall asleep without dreaming of him. She gets disturbed by strange and erotic dreams. She experiences dizzy spells and strange headaches. All this scares her and makes her consult a doctor. But all the tests come back negative. Taking leave from teaching, on the grounds of illness, she goes to an island in the New Year and rents out a house for six months. Retreating to an island or sea in order to overcome their sufferings is a common image found in Audrey Thomas’ stories.
Christine goes to the island “to puzzle out certain things” (WBY 62) in her life. She does not want to be disturbed by people. She does not want to face any more complications. So she makes up her mind not to be overly friendly with her neighbours, whoever they turn out to be. She even asks her friends not to visit her. She plugs the phone only once a week, on Sunday mornings, to call her mother. Other than that she shuts the whole world out. She does not answer any of her letters. But she admits that she would have answered the one letter that which never came – the letter from her husband.

The very first day on the island, she unpacks her things and takes her wedding ring out of its velvet box. She walks to the end of the government wharf and throws it in without having a second thought. This is the first step that she takes to overcome her loss and pain. Still, she fears the possibility of a fish swallowing it and a fisherman appearing at her door one day with the ring in his hand, as their initials were on the inside. But fortunately her fears do not turn true.

The friendship between Christine and Fotula, starts out with Fotula asking her name, and later explaining her that the real meaning for “Christine” is “Golden one”. She refers to her as “my golden one” (59). When asked about her husband and children, Christine admits that she has no children and that her husband has left her. Even when there is no wrong on her part, she has to take up the blame for her husband’s desertion. But Fotula comes forward to set her up with Greek men. She says that her son who knows many Greek men in Vancouver can help her arrange for a nice Greek husband. But this, Christine avoids saying that she is quite happy the way she is now. She does not want to get involved with another man.
In the few months that Christine has been on the island she has seen several people, white faced and unconscious, taken in the ambulance. But Fotula’s sudden illness leaves her perturbed. Christine has been lying on the bed half-asleep, when she hears the siren from the ambulance. She shoves her feet into the slippers and runs downstairs across the yard into the road to enquire what has happened. One of the volunteers who is about to close the door of the ambulance informs her that Fotula has had a heart attack. Christine is unable to digest it. Fotula’s absence makes her feel as if it is the end of the world. She is unable to concentrate on anything else. Her mind keeps thinking of what will happen to Fotula; whether she will get back hale and hearty. The noise from the ambulance sounding like all human terror gathered together terrifies her, especially with Fotula inside.

Christine, who lost all faith in God, after her husband’s desertion, prays for the first time in fifteen years for the sake of Fotula, who is fighting death in a hospital. She sincerely pleads God to save her life. She imagines Him, a bearded patriarch in black robes and black beard with a hat like a piece of stove-pipe – just like the God in Fotula’s eyes. She wholeheartedly prays for Fotula’s recovery, as it was she who helped her overcome the emptiness that she felt when her husband left her. She gets over her loneliness by stepping into the shoes of Fotula.

Knowing very well that Thursday is the day on which Fotula would knead her bread, she decides to check on that. She lets herself inside Fotula’s home with the help of the key hanging nearby the back door. The woodstove on which Fotula has been baking is still burning and she also finds the earthenware bowls set ready on the warming shelf. She has come just in time as the dough has risen right up to the top and almost over the edge. She starts kneading the bread which Fotula has left half done before she fell unconscious. She
punches the dough down hard until the bubbles burst. She feels that she has to finish the bread, as Fotula would count on her doing it. The bread is for the big feast that Fotula is going to have on Greek Easter, which is in just two weeks.

Everything in Fotula’s small house is neat and tidy as contrasted to her own untidy and disorderly life. Emergency numbers are posted neatly by the telephone; window sill is filled with shells full of flower seeds waiting to be planted as soon as the ground dried out, with little slips of paper on them to identify it; paper bags are neatly folded in a corner of the cupboard underneath the sink; rubber-bands and twist-ties saved in the kitchen drawer.

Looking at all this she decides to give her life some order. Earlier when she came to this island, she did not know to bake her own bread. It was Fotula who had taught her to knead bread. Now, Christine attends to the rising and kneading of Fotula’s Greek Easter bread, the “staff of life” (61).

As Fotula dies, her soul is metaphorically described as yeast: “fragrant, spicy, lighter than air, gradually rising up through the April skies” (69). She is the leavening agent in Christine’s befuddled life. Her encounter with Fotula adds meaning and pathos to her life. She overcomes her loss and loneliness by stepping into Fotula’s shoes and thereby trying to find meaning in her otherwise shattered life.

Some of Thomas’ women, however great their need for independence, don’t want to be alone. They are in need of relationships, especially a man’s bonding. They require the physical and emotional presence of another person, a body in their bed, even if it is simply “the reassuring back of the puzzle who was her husband” (Wachtel, Contemporary 51). Connection fails because ties between individuals are unequal. They are dependent on men, though resentful of them. To overcome their loneliness some women try to from new sexual
relationships, difficult though it may be, after an experience of loss. Women take on that challenge, facing as they do not only their reservations about the probability of success in the everlasting power struggles between male and female, but also the implications of new ties for children of the former relationship. These new relationships are sometimes simply dream-versions of the old flawed ones as seen in “Breaking the Ice”.

In this story, Thomas succeeds brilliantly in depicting the loneliness of a woman, Martha, alone on an island, separated from her children on Christmas day. It is her husband’s turn to have the children and it is really hard on her. She finds it unbearable to deal with the loneliness. She is in a completely desperate state that she reprimands herself for not having got used to it even after a year. As is recorded in the story, “There [is] something neurotic about people who [don’t] get used to things, something not quite nice” (GHGL 119). It is expected of her to be used to the loneliness that she has been living with, since her husband’s desertion. She finds it embarrassing to be around people who asked her about her husband leaving her. So she leaves the city and moves off to an island where she can obviate these questions.

Martha, a divorcee and a mother of two, overcomes her loneliness by putting up a false face. She does not want others to know of her real condition – a single woman struggling to subdue her loneliness. So she enacts a false self by determining to really dress up and attend the Blanding’s annual party. In her yearning to overcome her loneliness she understands the “importan[ce] to look nice” (119). So she wears a long wool skirt and a silk blouse, instead of her usual trousers and mended sweater. Although it is troublesome to wear such long dresses during winter as she has to hold her skirt up above her boots to keep it from dragging in the snow, she considers it more important for her to look nice than being
comfortable. It is a matter of pride for her. She does not want others to know her true self – the self which has been crying all along. So she makes up her face so that no one would discover the truth of her being lonely and the struggles that she has to confront to overcome it.

She even feels happy that her telephone is dead as she can now avoid awkward questions from her children asking her “Are you all right over there?” (119). The narrator insists to all who are concerned about her that she is “Perfectly all right,” noting to herself that this of course means “Perfectly All Wrong” (119). Looking at the “the lumpy grey stocking” (120) that her ex-husband has given her for Christmas, she cries: “How did you open a stocking by yourself?” (120). Christmas being the time of togetherness and all that is joyful and happy, she finds it even more distressing and troublesome to be left all alone in a house with nothing but her memories. In order to escape from this feeling of loneliness, she decides to go the Blandings’ party as she prefers a “house full of merry people than to sit moping at the cottage, alone . . . (120).

Back from the party, she is only left doubly depressed because a man she has recently met hasn’t called. Having read his letter over and over again, she finds her heart pounding each time the telephone went. Expecting his call on Christmas, leaves her distressed and disappointed as there are no calls other than the one from her children. However, after two days he does call her and informs her of his coming with his daughter, which makes her heart throb again. She who has always hated to drive on icy roads offers to pick him up on the island. The present unhappy Christmas is overlaid by happy past memories and potentially planned future ones.
One of her daughters arrives for New Year, so does the man with his daughter, and all get along splendidly. In her despair of wanting to overcome her loneliness, her heart pleads to her daughter to like the new man ‘Richard’: “Please like him . . . I like him a lot” (129). She tries to reassure her daughter that the arrival of Richard and his daughter will add more fun to their New Year celebrations.

At one point, the narrator considers phoning the man and putting him off because her daughter protests, a thought that produces the potential for an unhappy, rather than a happy ending. As the story moves forward, probing, hesitating, one senses the attempt of both the woman and the prose to evoke new rhythms. What seemed utterly desolate at the story’s beginning, metamorphoses at the end into new feelings and experiences. Her relationship with Richard, her new found sexual partner, relieves the loneliness of divorce and restores her sexual confidence. This chance meeting turns out to be a good escape to both of them. She shares with him not an emotional or spiritual relationship, but a purely physical one. The happy lovemaking is overlaid by worry about “Who would leave first?” (141).

Many of Thomas’ protagonists are middle-aged divorced mothers and they experience a feeling of loss and isolation. Middle-aged and alone is not a state these women had anticipated or desired. Their situations cause them a great deal of anxiety, partly because they feel lonely and unloved, and partly because they blame themselves for what they deem to be their largely undesirable solitary status. They wish to better understand themselves and their lives in order that they may alleviate the chronic self-doubt and self-recrimination from which they suffer.

Like a new-wave filmmaker, Thomas recognizes that if the lens of our attention can be kept focused on the moment time will eventually have its will and the scene will
necessarily be transformed. Thomas understands that such an attitude means a transformation of our sense of an ending. This story opens up the present, insisting on the possibility of living in a now that, while not ignoring the past or the future, comes to know the living moment as an expansive plain.

Audrey Thomas has also created women who try to overcome their loneliness and despair not only by developing a new relationship but also by just moving to a new place as they believe that “[a] change is as good as a rest . . .” (TGB 174). In “Salon des Refuses,” Mother Brown is a lonely widow who works in an insane asylum. She wishes to go to Florida or California when she quits her job. So everyday from the bus stop she walks up the hill to the asylum, thereby saving the taxi fare, which would add up to her savings. Thinking of Florida and California, she has been very careful in spending money and has not even changed her coat for a year. So she saves her hard earned money and her bank account, like a woman with a child, has been “swelling slowly and methodically” (TGB 166).

Though her children want her to live with them when she quits her job, she does not want to be a burden for them. So she plans to go to Florida alone. The very prospect of a life in the warmth of Florida sunshine and desirable waterfront residences makes her smile happily and gives her the strength to face all the troubles in the asylum. She plans to take one of her colleague, Cynthia, with her so that it would be cheaper. But she does not rush it. She does not want to get tied up with somebody she wouldn’t get along with. So she studies her carefully and negotiates within herself whether or not to tell her.

Although she is alone she does not want to be bound by relationships. She does not even want Cynthia to be referred as her friend. When Nurse Primrose calls Cynthia as her friend, she corrects her and tells “my acquaintance” (174). Towards the end of the story, she
retires to her room and sleeps peacefully thinking of the prospects of her new life in Florida. This story, concerning the life and death in a steel building for mentally defective old women, posits that all are “alone together” (Bowering, Snow 26). Audrey Thomas’ characters who are earlier baffled and angered by the outside world and its failure to accommodate her inside world, gain a kind of strength by observing that other people too have their confusion, desperation and failures.

Most of Thomas’ protagonists are presented at a point in their life when they are trying to recover from a failed relationship. After coming out of their terrible relationship, they try to overcome their sense of loneliness. Thomas’ women certainly hope for a comfortable reintegration into family or society – a return to a happier time, before the lover departed, before the divorce, before the miscarriage – in most of the stories one is made to recognize that such a return is impossible.

Women without men are usually assumed to be so involuntary. Both in life and in literature they are generally considered to be odd, pitiable, or laughable – and sometimes all three. Being passive as her lover and the society expects her to be, she can only accept the pain his rejection has caused her.

Most of the women in her short stories thus seem to suffer from a sense of loss. They break down when their husbands desert them, because they cannot live without guarantees: when they realize they have been living in a void, and not a world of certainties, they are overwhelmed by horror. They try to come over this loss and organize their lives. Mostly self-assertiveness and mother-daughter bonding is the alternative that is chosen to get relieved from their sense of loss. They want to belong to somebody to come over this loss and loneliness.