Presenting her stories from the perspective of female characters, Thomas examines the themes of quest for love and connectedness between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, and lovers. Explorers all, be it on foreign soil or under their own roofs, they attempt to navigate the complex undercurrents of their world, all the while seeking to understand and to be understood. This chapter concentrates on those stories which have man-woman relationship and parent-child relationship as its central themes. Quest for familial relationships is a major concern in many of her short stories.

“Roots,” a story which opens her rightly titled collection The Path of Totality, starts with Louise accidentally breaking the teapot which is the first present that her husband Michael has given her. With the image of the teapot lying down in pieces on the kitchen floor, the narrator brings forth the condition of their marital life which is also about to collapse. It has been nine years since they got married. Now their marriage is slowly breaking into pieces just like the teapot which lay in pieces on the kitchen floor. Looking at the broken pieces, Louise outrightly remarks that she understands the word ‘smithereens’. Michael who is a lover of words finds the term interesting and goes to look it up in his dictionary. He is more bothered about words and its etymology than dealing with the real life situations. She has to deal with the real world while Michael went around with “his head in the clouds” (WBY 3). This irritates her and she finds that the things which had been a source of attraction towards him before marriage, is now driving her mad. Louise always sees his ears, standing out from his head, as some sort of catcher’s mitt, which plucks out of the air
whatever new and exciting word is hurled. Nine years ago she finds it charming, but now it irritates her as Michael is evading his responsibilities and shoves it on her.

The previous day, the neighbour has come over to complain about the dandelions in their lawn, which might spread its seeds along the street, if not mowed immediately. Louise is about to remind Michael of the lawn remaining half-mowed for weeks and the promise that he has made to take care of it long back, when her elbow knocks off the teapot in the counter. The teapot, a Brown Betty which has survived several moves and a trip across the ocean now lies in bits. It is her own fault that the teapot broke because she wasn’t paying attention. As there are more teapots in the cupboard, Michael asks her to not to mind the soggy mess of it. But she does mind because it is she who has to deal with the broken pieces, while he is off into his world of dictionaries.

She finds it distressing that Michael is always daydreaming, unmindful of her feelings. He comes down with the dictionary looking at the entry for ‘smithereens.’ He gives a detailed account of the etymology of the word without taking his eyes of the book. When he finally looks up at her, she stands there sobbing with a yellow dustpan in her hand. Bending down and searching for the last fragments, she has pricked herself and there is a bright spot of blood on the tip of her nose. This makes him anxious that he stumbles and the dictionary falls out of his hand. Unable to see her wife’s crying, he tries to console her. He tilts her head back and licks off the blood from her nose. But this only infuriates her and she shouts at him stating that his wanting to be a perfect father to his sons is just an over-compensation for his failure in being a perfect husband. Although later she feels bad for shouting at him and pleads for his forgiveness, what she has said is unforgettable.
Towards the end of the story the lawn is mowed and the mower is put away but Louise finds no trace of Michael and her sons. She wonders whether they have gone downtown to buy her a new teapot. She feels guilty for hurting Michael. She decides to have him paged at all the department stores she could think of but he is not there at any of them. She frantically searches him everywhere. She tries the Provincial Museum but fails to find him even there. She comprehends that words are very powerful and that sometimes they are like dangerous animals, which once let out there is no way of predicting the damage it can inflict. She grabs her jacket and decides to go in search of her family.

She is relieved to find them in the park, at the petting zoo. She rushes up to them, wild-haired and red in the face from running. She spots Michael taking a picture of a young and beautiful Japanese couple who are on their honeymoon. Seeing his mother, Kevin, her younger son rushes to her and holds her hand. After the pictures have been taken and introductions made, the Japanese girl who is a teacher in baby school, sings a nursery song in Japanese. Michael holds up a teapot that she has brought for Louise to replace the broken one. On seeing this, the Japanese girl also rummages through her shopping bags and takes out a similar teapot that they have bought to take back home.

Audrey Thomas ends the story with the couples standing there and holding their teapots, smiling at one another. Louise’s quest for her family gets fulfilled. This is the only story where the relationship between the husband and wife is intact. Although it faces some initial threat to its destruction, the story ends on a happy note with husband and wife resolving their problems and getting back together.

While “Roots” presents a woman’s quest for her family from the mother’s standpoint, “Real Mothers” and “The Wild Blue Yonder” presents the same quest from the daughter’s
point of view. “Real Mothers” is a story about family relationships and their breakdown when the mother steps out of her traditional role on which the family depends for its stability. ‘Mother’, as Thomas says in *Intertidal Life*, defines a role or a function and not any particular woman; but it is at least a more accurate signifier of a class of persons than ‘Real Mothers.’ When it is said ‘She is a real little mother,’ it does not necessarily mean that she is a mother at all but simply that she is fulfilling a role within a system of cultural expectations. In *Intertidal Life* Thomas goes so far as to show that ‘real’ equals ‘not real’ when her narrator talks about exhibits in a museum, “lovingly restored, with a real blacksmith in a smithy . . . a real woman in a long dress and white mobcap sitting spinning or dipping candles. What ‘real’ would she be? Ladies and gentlemen, a real mother” (272).

In the short story the term ‘real mother’ derives its powerful emotional charge from the daughter’s realization of an absence or lack in their own lives: “She’s not a real mother anymore” (RM 18). Mothering is crucially important to children and indeed to mothers themselves, but it ought to be possible to revise such an inauthentic term as ‘real mothers’ without irreparable damage to the family. What this painful story of grief and loss shows is how difficult it is for a woman to displace the old ‘real mother’ concept as she tries to tell a different story about her own life within the family.

If it is a story about families, it is also more importantly a story about mothers and daughters, and its disturbing doubleness comes from its being told from the adolescent daughter’s point of view, Marie-Anne whose parents have been divorced after seventeen years of marriage and three children. When the story begins they had been separated for about a year as her father had gone to live with one of his female students. It is Marie-Anne who has a privileged view of her mother’s secret life, thanks to the mysterious arrangement
of the hot air vents which carry sounds directly down from her mother’s bedroom to the basement where she sleeps with her little sister Patty. She hears her mother crying in the nights after the separation; she is unable to bear the pain of her mother’s suffering. Although she wants to comfort her, she doesn’t know what to say to provide that comfort. Even, at that young age, she tries to understand about her father having to leave. The break up did not disturb her father. He took her on a long walk to a beach and explained her that he and her mother no longer ‘related.’ After her parents have separated, Marie-Anne looks back on their life as a family “as if someone had been telling her a continuous fairy story – or a long and beautiful lie. Or had she told it to herself?” (12) In the “fairy story” of family life as Marie-Anne recalls it, her parents’ arguments have been edited out and only memories of happy times remain. Her father remembers the same period of time in a radically different way: “We spent seventeen years as vegetables” (10). Marie-Anne and her father have each told themselves a story which emphasizes the things they wish to remember and which leave out the elements that do not fit their respective narrative paradigms.

After undergoing the pangs of separation for about a year, Marie Anne’s mother, Helen, decides to come out of her pains and start her life anew. She tells the children “that her ‘mourning period’ was over and she was damn well going to do something with her life” (13). So she joins Weight Watchers, loses thirty pounds, and decides to go back to school. The children enthusiastically participate in their mother’s attempt to ‘do something’ and a new period of family happiness begins. They are very supportive and they all share household responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning and, for a while, family life seems almost as idyllic as it did before the divorce. As Coral Ann Howells points out,
The father’s desertion . . . brings them more closely together with their mother at the centre, and plainly the family can absorb a variety of changes in routine with their mother going on a diet and going back to school so long as she belongs only to them and fulfils her traditional role as (deserted) wife and mother. (No Sense 115)

The mother alone provides the guarantee for all the old stories of ordinary family life with its small crises and its happy times which already belong to the past. Her mother has to carry the burden of proof about the past just as she must provide the model for her daughter’s emergent womanhood. At this vulnerable stage, Marie-Anne needs to identify with her mother’s femaleness as maternal but definitely not sexual. This close mother-daughter relationship in the absence of men is a symbiotic one as each confirms the value of the other in the paradoxical coexistence of innocence and experience.

But all this delicate ecology of family life registered by Thomas with such loving detail is upset when the mother brings another man into the house: “Then, her mother met Lionel and the world came to an end” (RM 16). Lionel smokes dope, is rude to Marie-Anne and her little sister Patty, and, worst of all, absorbs the mother’s attention until seven-year-old Patty is driven to say, “She’s not a real mother anymore . . . She doesn’t love anybody but that jerk Lionel” (18). The middle-of-the-night weeping stops and instead Marie-Anne hears the sounds of her mother’s lovemaking. These muffled sounds run like a subtext beneath the actions of the narrative, bearing witness to the woman’s story and accompanying the adolescent girl’s pain and confusion at the changes in her mother.

The catastrophic effects of Lionel’s aggressively male presence are recorded by Marie-Anne as a chronicle of her mother’s betrayal of her, for not only does Lionel take her
mother’s attention away from her and her little sister but he also forces Marie-Anne to confront her mother’s sexuality, so that it becomes the girl’s painful initiation into sexual awareness as she watches her mother transgressing the limits of her ‘motherliness.’ What the mother sees as necessary in her quest to redefine herself is from Marie-Anne’s point of view an intolerable disorder, a reversal of roles so carelessly formulated by her mother in her new happiness. “Sometimes, I think that you’re the mother and I’m the teenager, Marie-Anne” (19). So, family patterns shift in a way that is sickening to the adolescent girl; while her older brother accepts Lionel and her little sister spends more and more time with her father’s new family, she is the one left alone. When the crisis comes, it is the result of being completely misunderstood by Lionel, who accuses Marie-Anne of being sexually jealous of her mother. His crudely Freudian reading is unacceptable (to us as to Marie-Anne) because he cannot see, outsider that he is, how his arrival has disrupted the inner continuity of the mother-daughter relationship. But though he cannot see this, it is encoded in Marie-Anne’s Alice in Wonderland nightmare:

Just before dawn, she fell asleep and had a strange dream that all the people upstairs were dancing on enormous black and white squares of polished marble, and that, suddenly, they began to slip and slide, and all their legs broke off at the ankles. She could hear the screams, the screams, the screams. (21)

The idol with the feet of clay lurks beneath this dream of disorder and breakage, where necessarily related parts are painfully separated. As the dream images Marie-Anne’s own anguish, so it prefigures the choice she must make and gives a veiled warning about the outcome of this choice. Marie-Anne acts on the dream the very next morning by going
secretly to her father in what amounts to a betrayal of her mother. So it is arranged that her father will come to take her and her sister to live with him and his new wife. The story ends, however, not with arrangement but with disarrangement, for as the girls depart with their father in his car,

her mother dashed down the front steps, barefoot in the snow, her dressing gown open, screaming at them, pounding on the car window, running after the car and shouting, “Don’t take my baby from me, don’t take my baby from me, don’t take. . . .” (22)

Marie-Anne’s nightmare spills over into real life as her mother screams.

Thus in “Real Mothers” it is seen that the daughter’s quest for her family ends up in the disruption of her family. Marie-Anne who is unable to construe her mother getting into a relationship with another man, decides to desert her mother and settle with her father, who has already deserted the family to live with her young girlfriend. Marie-Anne’s quest to patch up her family ends up in destruction of the same.

A similar setting is noted in another story “The Wild Blue Yonder.” Thomas has made a man the most remarkable and engaging character in “The Wild Blue Yonder.” The story is about a daughter’s loving recollection of her father, a warm-hearted Second World War navy pilot. It records the beautiful relationship between a father and the daughter, and the daughter’s quest for the family reunion when he returns from the prisoner of war camp completely broken. With a skilful eye for colour and detail, Thomas evokes the charmed period in the child’s life, before he goes to war – a time of silly jokes, Saturday matinees, banana splits in the local tearoom and faith in fighting for one’s country. The story opens with an endearing conversation between the father and the daughter, Frances. Standing at the
middle of the Front Street Bridge and leaning over the concrete rail, the father and daughter stare down into the khaki-coloured water swollen from the spring run-offs and shares between them the last of a fifteen-cent bag of peanuts. Dawdling with her father and taking a trip downtown with him is something that she finds more enjoyable to do than to take a trip with her mother. There is no backtracking when it comes to her mother because she is such an organized person who carries a list and does her shopping with an almost military precision, ticking off each item with a gold pencil that she carries. At the end of such expeditions they always have lunch in the tea-room of MacLean’s Department Store where Frances’ mother always orders the same thing – “a peanut butter sandwich, a dill pickle and a glass of chocolate milk” (WBY 204) which is in no way different from what she has at home regularly. She considers eating lunch there as a mere excuse to sit down and rest a while.

On the other hand, Frances sees the trip with her father as a mystery tour and cherishes the time spent with him. He is a dawdler, a talker and a man of impulse who always thrills her by his spontaneous acts. Nothing is preplanned when it comes to him, so an outing with him is always filled with surprises that the daughter yearns for. “Something would catch his eye . . . I never knew where we might end up” (204). Sometimes they go to the Olympia Tea room, run by a Greek, and delighting on the models displayed in the front window, they share an enormous ice-cream sundae. The proprietor too sometimes sits with them and has a pungent cigarette along with his father, which she never once objected as she is always happy around his father. But when they get back home her mother always finds it annoying as her clothes and hair still stank of cigarette.

Her father who has been on leave from his naval training base in Pensacola is about to return the next day. So at home her mother prepares a special dinner for him and together
they discuss the movie, *The Road to Morocco* which they had seen earlier. Her mother strongly opposes the movie as it is not suitable for a child of her age and she has a firm opinion that the ‘Road’ movies have made both the daughter and the father employ vulgar language. She, on the other hand, preferred listening to Bing on records or on the radio. The next day they go to the station to see him off to the naval training from where he will be on an aircraft carrier to somewhere in the pacific. Frances prays for the war to get over quick so that her father would be back soon and then she could see the next series of the ‘Road’ movies, with her father, which they enjoyed watching together.

Frances and her father have a wonderful time together. She always treasured the things shared between them. Her father once tries to explain her the term ‘caul’. Sensing that she did not understand about the sac, fluid and membrane surrounding the baby, he explicates it in such a way so that the child can easily understand it. He tells her that it is more like the goldfish in a bag full of water that she once brought home and like the membrane inside an eggshell. Her father who is a wonderful swimmer assures her that he will not drown as he is born with a caul on his head. She imagines it as some kind of cape with magic feathers.

Years later, Frances’ mother informs her that the father has gone missing and is presumed to be drowned. This comes as a blow to Frances who loved her father very much. She refuses to believe the fact that her father is no more. Her strong trust in her father did not allow her to think that he has drowned, because her father himself has told her that he “won’t drown” (204). Her mother, on the other hand, accepts the fact and moves on with her life, taking up a job in Marine Midland Bank.

Eventually her father does come back from World War II but to Frances’ dismay the heroic, romantic figure is now a kind of misplaced person, unable to function in the world to
which he returns. Frances’ world falls apart as her mother decides to divorce him. Just like the daughter in “Real Mothers” she too feels that she had been telling herself a fairy story which has now got shattered. Thus “The Wild Blue Yonder,” is the story of a daughter trying to resurrect, in words, a father lost to war. By cherishing the memory of her father, the daughter keeps the best part of him alive in herself.

As discussed in the second chapter, families are not intact and husband and wife go separate ways. Hence, when their quest for man-woman relationship fails, Thomas’ women revert it on their relationship with their daughters. In their crumbling family structure, a source of strength for most of her protagonists is their daughters. Hence, they expose the patriarchal myth of possession and install in its place the true plot of the maternal romance, that is, the mother-daughter plot of bonding with each other. “The mother daughter combination is rare in legend and literature,” laments Elizabeth Fisher in a 1971 article entitled “Mothers and Daughters” (3). This literary gap that Fisher observes is filled in many of Audrey Thomas’ stories. From her very first story “If One Green Bottle . . .,” a fascination with this relationship permeates her short stories. Her stories generally portray the mother-daughter relationship as a close, positive, nurturing one. They usually approach the relationship not from the daughter’s perspective but the mother’s. The mothers in these stories are mostly single women raising adolescent daughters.

One such story is “The Dance,” from Goodbye Harold, Good Luck, which deals with many of the ambiguities of the mother-daughter relationship. The protagonist of this story is a middle-aged, unmarried woman, who has to come to terms with the fact that her fifteen-year-old daughter is entering the world of romance and sexuality just as she herself seems to be leaving it. The two are vacationing together in Greece. While they travel by ferry to the
island where they will stay, the mother reflects “I like going places by boat; I suppose it has something to do with ‘crossing the waters,’ which to me is always symbolic as well as real” (GHGL 74). This observation is appropriate to the story, as both characters are approaching important crossings on their life-journeys. The mother is delighted to discover that her teenage daughter “loves to travel on boats . . . She has decided that she likes the whole sense of ‘getting there’ and is willing to wait for ‘there’ while she enjoys the voyage” (75). The daughter’s willingness to appreciate the process of travel rather than being impatient for the destination obviously applies to her attitude towards her own maturation process. As we see her through her mother’s eyes, she is moving gracefully into womanhood without rushing the journey.

The mother’s struggle is to adopt the same accepting attitude towards her own journey. At the beginning of the story she muses about the implications of such expressions as “on the shelf” and “well preserved” as they apply to women of her age; these words define her in a way she can only accept by subverting the meaning of “on the shelf” to suggest that “what is ‘on the shelf’ can presumably be taken off at some later date, like a jar of preserves sealed up in August to be enjoyed in the chilly days of winter. . . . Or so I tell myself, deriving a little comfort from this pretty metaphor” (71). Her single state has some uncomfortable side effects. She feels isolated from the other tourists on the island: as a single woman with her daughter, she has no place in the family-oriented atmosphere. She is conscious not only of her singleness but also of her age. When she compares the colour of her daughter’s hair to the colour of the waxing moon, one is aware not only of the common association of the moon with femaleness, but also of the fact that waxing implies waning. If the daughter is waxing into womanhood, must the mother be waning? Their experience at a
Greek disco suggests that this may be so, and naturally this is difficult for the mother to accept.

While the daughter chooses from among a bevy of young Greek men who want to dance with her, the mother sits alone, feeling “like a chaperone or more accurately one of those Spanish duennas who followed well-bred Spanish girls around. All I need is a large mantilla, some jewels on my arthritic fingers, and an aristocratic nose” (83). The nice balance Thomas strikes here between humour and resentment captures the ambiguity of the mother’s feelings, pleased at the attention her daughter is attracting yet regretting her own inability to attract such attention anymore. Later, when they visit the palace of an ancient queen who “kept a harem of young boys,” the mother wonders “at what age she took up this interesting hobby” (84). Again, the humour is present, but so is a more serious reflection on society’s assumption that older women are not sexual beings.

The story ends with the mother’s memory of a Greek folk dance in which she once participated, a dance similar to the one her daughter and the Greek young people will dance later that night after the tourists have left the disco and the American dance music has been shut off. Significantly, the mother was first introduced to this joyful, life-affirming folk dance by a woman of fifty who obviously was still very involved in life and in seeking new experiences. While one admires the mother’s healthy acceptance of the fact that it is time for her daughter to ‘join the dance’ of life and sexuality, one is also encouraged to believe that, despite her own fears and the expectations of society the mother does not yet need to withdraw from the dance.

This story presents a very positive mother-daughter relationship – they are obviously comfortable with one another; they speak to each other with humour and trust. The mother’s
attitude to her daughter’s growing maturity is laudable, but her insecurity about her own position gives the story a realistic sense of ambiguity. This is typical of Thomas’ most positive portrayals of mothers and daughters: the relationship is a healthy one, beneficial to both mother and daughter, but it is never oversimplified or idealized.

In the title story of Goodbye Harold, Good Luck we again find a mother and daughter travelling together. The journey this time is from Vancouver to Dawson Creek by train and bus, both modes of travel which, like the ferry boat in “The Dance,” emphasize the process of ‘getting there.’ Francine is taking a vacation away from a husband who demeans and ridicules both her and her daughter. She has reached a point in her marriage where she feels unbearably restricted and believes that her husband hates her. This feeling manifests itself in the physical symptom of an inability to breathe.

Francine, like the woman in “The Dance,” feels out of place appearing in public as a woman without a man. When her ten-year-old daughter Emily is with her, she feels “safely defined” (GHGL 205). She recognizes that society defines a woman according to her role as a mother. But Francine does not bring Emily along on the trip simply so that she can be identified as a mother; she feels that Emily needs to escape the home situation as much as she herself does. Both mother and daughter are targets of the perfectionist husband’s ridicule. Though this situation is unfortunate, it has obviously created a bond between mother and daughter. Like the two characters in “The Dance,” Francine and Emily relate easily and comfortably to each other, enjoying a camaraderie which the domineering husband/father does not share.

As Francine sits alone in a hotel bar, her daughter upstairs watching a movie, she reviews some of the confrontations which led to the crisis in her marriage. The
entertainment in the bar includes a female comedian telling sexual jokes, and a stripper – women who play up to and underscore negative views of women. This atmosphere provides an appropriate backdrop for Francine to reflect on the subtler and perhaps more insidious oppression of which she and her daughter have been the victim. Realizing that Emily, at ten, has already started to lash out against her father, she worries “Would Emily grow up hating men?” (218). She wants to pass on to her daughter a positive image of what it means to be a woman, though her own memories and the activity around her in the hotel bar remind us that society often undermines a positive self-image for women. Francine does not want Emily’s definition of womanhood to exclude the possibility of close relationships with men; she only wants those relationships, for her daughter and for herself, to be positive, loving, and self-affirming.

The message that Emily discovers written in the steam on the bathroom mirror – “Goodbye Harold, Good Luck” – suggests to Francine the possibility that she, too, could leave her domineering husband with just such a cavalier attitude. The light-hearted tone of the message and the carefree leave-taking it implies contrasts with the desperation of Francine’s thoughts about her marriage, and perhaps reminds her that she is more free than she thinks she is. The woman who left the message on the mirror has exercised power by writing an ending to her own story – a story Francine and Emily can only imagine, and in the traces that woman leaves behind, Francine sees the possibility that she, too, can write a new story for herself and her daughter.

The closeness evident in these stories between the single mothers and their daughters is present also in “Natural History.” The main character in this story is identified only as “the mother” (RM 25). She too is a single mother, living alone in a cottage on an island with her
daughter in order to “complete her recovery” (24). Whether she is recuperating from an illness or recovering emotionally from the trauma of divorce is not told. However, one does read her musings on the word ‘recovery.’ “Nice word that, re-cover. To cover yourself over again, something essential having been ripped away, like a deep rip in the upholstery” (24). What has been ripped away is not only a relationship but part of the woman’s self-definition, her identity as a wife, and she, like other Audrey Thomas characters, is consciously defining herself, reconstructing an image of herself whole, re-covered. In this, she is similar to the women in “Real Mothers,” “Crossing the Rubicon,” and “Goodbye Harold, Good Luck.”

“Natural History,” more than any of these stories, emphasizes the importance of the daughter in the mother’s attempt to recover herself. A divorced mother spending the summer with her daughter in a cottage on an island provides the background of the story. Mother and daughter have laid out an ambitious schedule of plans for their summer activities, but the schedule goes unnoticed as they enjoy the summer and each other’s company. “Natural History” unfolds on a night when mother and daughter are sleeping outdoors, watching the full moon. The mother is reminded of the association between the moon and woman: “The old triple moon goddess, corresponding to the three phases of woman” (27). But the fact that the moon is also associated with madness reminds us that there is a dark side to female experience – a dark side the mother shares with her friend at the beach, whose husband has left her, when both women admit to violent desires to kill their ex-husbands. This threat of darkness, of disorder, is embodied in other vaguely threatening forces within the story. The rat that gnaws a hole in the cottage wall, and the mother’s plans to poison the rat, hint at menace, as does the daughter’s description of their house as “something that a witch might live in” (26). On the day the story takes place, they are visited by a young woman who has
gone blind as a result of diabetes that has not yet been stabilized. The mother recognizes that the visitor’s blindness and obesity are “signs that things inside had got out of control” (26). This fear of the disorderly element of life – disease, violence, rejection, the threat of strangers, and the rat that gnaws at the cottage wall – moves like an undercurrent beneath their idyllic summer.

Yet these potential threats to their happiness do not drive a wedge between mother and daughter. Instead they grow closer to one another. This may be partly because this mother recognizes that instability is not necessarily negative. The summer activities of the mother and daughter underline the creative possibilities of disorder. The daughter, Clytie, named, “not for the moon, but after the sunflower” is “very orderly” (27). She makes up a schedule of the useful and educational activities she and her mother will pursue during the summer and posts it on the fridge, “decorated in the corners with orange suns and purple starfish” (27). Predictably, the schedule is ignored as summer lethargy sets in and time is taken up with less edifying activities such as reading aloud and painting one another’s toenails. The mother struggles to balance the need for order and structure with the need to experience the kind of warmth and spontaneous delight she and her daughter have found in one another’s company and in their island home. If the house is a witch’s house that is not necessarily negative either: a witch can be a symbol of female power, as is the moon, whose silvery light permeates this story.

Yet the mother remembers that the moon shines only with the reflected light of the sun. Her daughter’s name is a reference to the Greek myth in which “Clytie became the sunflower . . . because she adored Apollo and always turned her head to follow him across the sky” (Coldwell, Natural 145). Like the mother in “Crossing the Rubicon,” this mother,
also a writer, wonders what myths about male-female relationships her daughter will inherit. The mother has herself experienced a painful divorce or separation, and she is raising her daughter in an unsafe world where she must learn to beware of strangers who “are usually men” (RM 33). Yet, like Francine in “Goodbye Harold, Good Luck,” this mother does not want her daughter to grow up rejecting relationships with men, any more than she wishes her to exist only to adore a god-like male Apollo. She must grow up aware of “the moon . . . , female . . . dependent on the sun, yet so much brighter, seemingly, against the darkness of the sky; so much more mysterious, changing her shape, controlling the waters, gathering it all in her net” (29).

One of the books that Clytie and her mother read aloud is The Wind in the Willows, and as they read the mother thinks of the book’s anthropomorphic animals, which parallel her own tendency to think of and talk to her cat in human terms. Then she remembers the rat that has gnawed through the cottage wall and reminds herself that “the rat was real” (29). She is, perhaps, contrasting that rat with the amiable talking Rat of The Wind in the Willows and thereby calling into question whether the literal rat is more real than the literary Rat. Both versions of the story may be valid, as are the different possible interpretations of the relation between female and male, sun and moon. Still the mother wonders which her daughter will accept as the ‘real’ story.

She believes that the answer lies not in sharply contrasting opposites but in balance, in teaching her daughter to be “strong and yet still loving.” Perspective is the key: “The trick was, of course, to try and get the right distance on everything; to stand in just the right relationship to it all. But how? Would her daughter be any better at it than she was?” (33). As she lies awake by moonlight, the mother experiences a brief moment of illumination in which
all the conflicting images she has been remembering: “moon, blind girl, rat, her own solitude, the cat . . . her daughter, the still moment” come together in “wholeness, harmony, radiance; all of it making a wonderful kind of sense” (34). Her immediate reaction is to reach out towards her sleeping child in a loving and protective gesture.

In this story as well the single mother finds the mother’s and daughter’s nurturing of each other as vital to redefine herself. All these mothers wonder what stories about womanhood, about women’s relationships with men, they will pass on to their daughters. Each of them strives for the kind of balance between order and disorder sought in “Natural History” – an image of womanhood which is positive but not rigidly defined which will allow the daughter to write herself into story as the mother has struggled to do.

The mothers in “Natural History,” “Goodbye Harold, Good Luck,” and “Crossing the Rubicon,” are concerned about what stories their daughters will inherit about male-female relationships, about a woman’s place in the world. A more complete resolution of this mother-daughter relationship is found in two more short stories: “Mothering Sunday” and “Sunday Morning, June 4, 1989”. Sitting in an elegant French restaurant surrounded by “mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, mothers and sons and daughters-in-law,” (GHGL 153) the protagonist of “Mothering Sunday” reminisces her past life on a Mother’s Day. Not knowing the significance of the day, she has arranged to meet her friend Lydia at the restaurant. Being early, as usual, she spends her time by looking at the people in the restaurant. As it is not the kind of restaurant for young children, not many kids are seen around. Sitting there all alone surrounded by several mothers she feels dreadful. She wants to establish that she too is a mother, but it pains her as there are no children of hers or corsages from them.
Several of the mothers are sipping their Anna M. cocktails, concocted in honour of Anna M. Jarvis, the founder of Mother’s day in America, while she is sipping her white wine. Embarrassed of being alone, she earnestly wishes for Lydia to hurry up. The protagonist sees the company of Lydia as a redeemer. Together they make each other laugh and “egg each other on to say more and more outrageous things” (154). Rejecting the suggestion of the waiter for Anna M. cocktail, Lydia asks for Bloody Mary or a glass of milk, as she finds it being more appropriate for the occasion.

The story, beginning with a return to the motif of the Virgin Mary: “Hail Mary, Wounded art Thou among Women,” (153) reveals the dark side of mother-daughter relations, as the narrator thinks of her mother:

I have wounded her many times; she has wounded me. We don’t talk about this. We send each other letters and greeting cards and presents; we worry about one another. We wonder. (159)

The speaker compares the French word blesser – to wound – with the English blessed. “Hail Mary, Blessed art Thou Among Women. All the Marys bleed” (153). Thomas’ reader is on familiar ground here, contemplating Mary as the head of a bleeding, birthing body of mothers throughout the ages.

But in this story, the focus is not on the first-person narrator’s own experience of motherhood, though she is a mother. As she sits alone in a restaurant on Mother’s Day, waiting for a friend to join her, she muses on motherhood, on “bloody Mary” (155), on the Mother’s Day traditions of her past and everything that gets left out of myth: “No blood, no bloody Mary in the nativity accounts. Immaculate conception, immaculate delivery. We mothers know better, sitting here sipping our drinks, picking at the expensive food” (155).
But the centre of the story is the narrator’s memory of a recent visit to her own eighty-nine-year-old mother, who each time she visits, gives her some souvenir of the past. When the speaker notices among her mother’s keepsakes an empty picture frame, she asks her mother “whose picture the frame had been for. She said, ‘My mother.’ I asked her where the picture was now. She said, ‘I tore it up’” (159). No further explanation is given. The narrator leaves, somewhat disturbed by this brief glimpse into “something terrible and private, something between mothers and daughters, the dark side of all this, the wounds as well as the blessings” (159). She is well aware of the dark side of her own relationship with her mother. “I have wounded her many times; she has wounded me. We don’t talk about this” (159). Perhaps things unspoken cannot be said to be ‘resolved,’ but there is certainly an acceptance here of responsibility on both sides, and a willingness to leave things unsaid that perhaps recognizes the power of silence. As the speaker remembers this incident, she is also rehearsing it, preparing to turn it into narrative for her friend Lydia when Lydia arrives for lunch. She is writing a story that allows her to accept her mother, along with the wounds and blessings. The story ends with a final glimpse of her mother among the other residents of her senior citizen’s complex, a picture that contains a clear note of admiration.

This almost-admiring view of the mother as crotchety old lady is expanded in “Sunday Morning, June 4, 1989.” Here the main character is middle-aged divorcee Pauline. Pauline and her brother refer to “their difficult mother” as “The Ayatollah” and “The One True Cross” (WBY 190). The mother is now ninety-two with a “long history of . . . aberrations” (190); Pauline and her brother have diagnosed her problem as “a post-partum depression from which she never recovered” (190). Pauline tries to work out her ambiguous relationship with her mother and sometimes calls her “the Aged Pea” (Graven Images 5) with
grudging affection. Her Sunday morning phone call to her mother is laden with the small frustrations and misunderstandings of adult mother-daughter relationships. Pauline’s mother asks if Pauline has had a medical checkup recently because she seemed not to be her “usual self”; Pauline silently wonders, “How the hell would she know what was her, Pauline’s ‘usual self’?” (WBY 193). As in other Thomas’ stories, the mother’s letters, full of “accusation or grievance” (194) are recalled as life-long irritants. Yet despite the annoyances, Pauline has obviously achieved a certain amount of acceptance of her mother, enough to recognize that, no matter how much she might like to, “she could no more walk away from her mother than she could walk away from the woman in the mirror” (196). The awareness that her mother is a part of herself allows her to feel “a great rush of affection for her mother, this tiny, scrappy, dreadful woman who had, after all, given her the gift of life.” She recognizes that her mother “would never be happy and she would no doubt go to her grave . . . thinking life had somehow given her the short end of the stick” (200), yet Pauline is able to feel a genuine sympathy for her self-pitying mother.

Two stories compete for the reader’s, and Pauline’s, attention throughout “Sunday Morning, June 4, 1989.” Pauline’s conversation with her mother takes place against the backdrop of that morning’s news, which includes “the killings in Tiananmen Square and the death of the real Ayatollah, Khomeini” (192). Pauline’s ironic contrast between her mother’s petty worries and the vast human misery in China and Iran increases her anger at her mother, but this is balanced by her recognition that “her mother’s personal misery was what was real to her” (199).

As Pauline listens to the sound on the radio of Iranian women mourning Khomeini’s death, she wonders, “What had the Ayatollah done for these women?” (197). Why should
they mourn a man whose leadership had apparently brought them nothing but oppression? Pauline’s identification of her mother as ‘the Ayatollah’ makes it easy for the reader to ask the corresponding question: why would Pauline mourn her mother’s death? Why does she maintain any connection at all with a woman who has oppressed her all her life? No reason is given; Pauline is simply aware that her connection to her mother is as irrevocably a fact of life as is the tension between them and that both will continue until the mother’s death – a loss Pauline will certainly mourn. This is as close as one is likely to come to a mother-daughter reconciliation in Thomas’ work. Pauline comes to terms with the mother-daughter relationship for herself, and Audrey Thomas, in the best way she can: with an awareness and acceptance of blessings as well as wounds. The daughter/mother of Audrey Thomas’ stories triumphs by choosing what mythology, what songs and stories, she will accept from her mother and what she will pass on to her daughter. In doing so, she confirms the bond between generations of women and the songs they teach each other.

Audrey Thomas also portrays women who are struggling with their conflict in relationship with their daughters and their new found lover. In their quest to form new relationships, they are sometimes left totally confused, unable to come to a resolution. The woman in “Harry and Violet” is torn apart by her awareness of the dual roles she must play. She realizes that she has become the battleground for an exhausting struggle between her child and her lover. She is aware that her lover feels “her ready to swing instantly from lover to mother at the sound of a distant cry” (RM 71). The conflict is not between equal forces: “If it ever came to a choice, there was none. Always, the child was first” (69). She chooses her responsibility to her child over her sexual needs, but the choice does not obliterate her need for sex and for romantic love. When she and her lover are having sex, she realizes that “she
needed this too, and from this man who loved her. . . . She felt all the empty and sore places fill up, expand, smooth out (74). For the woman, a conflict is immediately established between her definition of herself as mother and her identity as her husband’s lover, and, more importantly, as a sexual being in her own right.

The lover and the child, by their hostility towards each other and their inability to understand why the woman needs them both, are each attempting to construct a situation in which they will come first in the woman’s life. She can be all mother or all lover, but she will have to choose. She wants to tell a story in which she can be both, and not be torn apart by their demands. The lover and the child attempt to set up a system of rigidly defined oppositions: ‘mother’ versus ‘lover,’ while she wants to allow these self definitions to be more fluid. When she looks back at her first meeting with her lover, in a cafe where “[t]hey were reading the same book, only different volumes,” she feels “that he had been led into her world under false pretences” (70), for she appeared to be an unencumbered single woman, and the reality of her child does not present itself until the affair has already started. Throughout their relationship she is, in a sense, attempting to revise his initial reading of her, to make him recognize what the words “I have a child, a little girl” (70) signify in her life.

In this story, as in “Real Mothers,” the mother’s bed is the site of conflict. For the small child in both stories, the mother’s bed is a secure place where she can seek shelter when she is frightened, where she can start the day close to her mother. In “Real Mothers,” it is also the place where mother and adolescent daughter confide in each other. For the lover in both stories, the bed is the place for sex, and children are not welcome there. The mother’s bed, like the mother’s body, has both a sexual and a maternal function, and it comes to represent the divided territory of the woman’s life. The mothers in these stories struggle to
take control of their own lives, to decide for themselves what roles they should play, while lovers and children try to make such decisions for them.

Pauline Butling, in her article “Thomas and Her Rag Bag,” discusses some of the other stories in *Real Mothers*, then turns to “Harry and Violet” with the phrase “On a more humorous note” (198). This is typical of critical approaches to “Harry and Violet” which is usually read as a funny story. Unlike “Real Mothers,” it ends with an amusing anecdote rather than with a tragic disruption of family life. But the story is more than just the set-up to a punch line. Read along with “Real Mothers” it is seen as another rendering, from a different point of view and in a different tone, of the same basic conflict. Both stories ask: What is a ‘real mother’? Can she also be a ‘real lover’? To what extent is she free to define the term ‘real mother’ for herself?

The conflict of the woman in “Harry and Violet,” is not simply between the roles of mother and lover. She needs privacy, a space in which she can define herself. The woman in “Harry and Violet” tells her lover “I wish we had space for separate bedrooms . . . I’ve got used to my own private space, that’s all” (RM 66). The woman’s bed, once again, is the site of the conflict. Can the bed be a place for her, alone, as well as a place to have sex with a lover or nurture a child? Can her body belong primarily to the woman herself rather than to all those who make claims upon it?

Harry in the short story responds to his lovers’ need for private space petulantly, saying “I can move out” (66). He is either unable or unwilling to understand what the words my own private space” signify in a woman’s language. Helen in “Real Mothers” and the unnamed central character in “Harry and Violet” complain that their children refuse to allow
them to exist as sexual beings. This is a serious threat to their identity, as they identify themselves by their sexuality (relationship with men).

This same conflict arises in a different form for the many Audrey Thomas characters who are divorced, middle-aged mothers. These women face a conflict when they try to balance sexual relationships with their responsibilities as mothers. The conflict lies not so much in the fact that ‘mother’ and ‘lover’ are two mutually exclusive roles that the woman must play, but rather that they are two ways of defining herself. The different ‘selves’ within her are partly socially constructed, partly natural, and the conflict often lies in not knowing where the natural self ends and the socially constructed self begins. Thus it is seen that Audrey Thomas’ stories deal with the subtle nuances of contemporary (sexual) relationships, human emotions in general and the strong links between mothers and daughters. They find meaning in their relationship with their daughters, thereby satisfying their quest for familial relationships.