Poetry as moral education: representation of maternal love and gratitude in Miller Mottla's "thank you Mom"

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of maternal love and gratitude in Miller Mottla's poem *Thank You Mom* within the framework of literary analysis. The research aims to explore how intrinsic poetic elements construct emotional and ethical meaning in the text. Using a qualitative interpretative design, the study applies close reading to analyze key intrinsic components, including theme, diction, imagery, tone, and moral dimension. The findings reveal that maternal love is portrayed as a formative emotional force characterized by constancy, sacrifice, and moral guidance, positioning the mother figure as the central axis of the speaker's identity formation. Gratitude emerges as the dominant thematic response, functioning not only as an emotional expression but also as an ethical recognition of relational influence. The analysis further demonstrates that linguistic simplicity enhances emotional accessibility and strengthens moral communicability, allowing the poem to convey universal values through direct expression. This study contributes to literary scholarship by challenging the assumption that poetic value depends primarily on structural complexity and by demonstrating that accessible poetic language can effectively function as a medium of moral education. The findings highlight the significance of poetry as both an aesthetic and pedagogical form capable of fostering emotional awareness and ethical reflection.

Keyword: maternal love; gratitude; poetry analysis; moral representation; literary studies

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1. INTRODUCTION

Poetry holds a significant position in literary studies due to its capacity to communicate complex emotions, personal experiences, and social values through condensed and aesthetically structured language. As a literary genre, poetry employs intrinsic elements such as diction, imagery, rhythm, and tone to construct meanings that often transcend literal interpretation (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). Beyond its artistic dimension, poetry also functions as a medium of ethical reflection, enabling readers to engage with emotional and moral insights embedded within linguistic expression (Wellek & Warren, 1956). Consequently, poetry can be understood not only as an artistic artifact but also as a pedagogical text capable of shaping moral awareness.

Among the most universal themes in poetry is motherhood, a subject frequently associated with unconditional love, sacrifice, emotional resilience, and moral guidance. In literary discourse, maternal figures are often represented as foundational sources of emotional security and ethical formation that influence a child's psychological and moral development (Guerin et al., 2011). Such representations resonate across cultures because they reflect shared human experiences and fundamental relational values. Gratitude commonly emerges within these poetic portrayals as an emotional and ethical response to maternal devotion, reinforcing the idea that literature serves as a mirror of human relational consciousness (Eagleton, 2007).

The poem *Thank You Mom* by Miller Mottla exemplifies this thematic tradition through its portrayal of sincere gratitude expressed by a child toward a mother figure. The poem presents the mother as patient, devoted, and emotionally supportive, emphasizing her role in shaping the speaker's identity and personal

growth. Unlike highly symbolic or structurally complex poems, Mottla's work utilizes simple and direct language to foreground emotional authenticity. This stylistic choice supports the critical view that poetic meaning does not necessarily depend on linguistic complexity but may instead emerge from clarity, sincerity, and emotional immediacy (Perrine, 1992).

While literary scholarship has frequently emphasized aesthetic complexity as a principal indicator of poetic value, relatively limited attention has been devoted to poems whose significance lies in their emotional transparency and moral accessibility. This gap underscores the importance of examining how structurally simple poetry can function as a medium of moral education. In this context, *Thank You Mom* provides a compelling case for analysis because it demonstrates how poetic language can construct ethical meaning through straightforward expression rather than elaborate figurative techniques.

Accordingly, this study investigates how maternal love is represented in the poem, how gratitude is articulated by the poetic speaker toward the mother figure, and how moral values are constructed through the interaction of these themes. By examining intrinsic literary elements—including theme, diction, imagery, tone, and moral dimensions—through qualitative close reading, this research argues that poetic simplicity does not diminish literary significance; rather, it can enhance emotional communicability and ethical resonance. In doing so, the study positions poetry as a form of moral education and contributes to literary scholarship by highlighting how accessible poetic texts can function as meaningful vehicles of ethical reflection and emotional understanding.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative design within the framework of literary analysis. Qualitative methodology is particularly suitable for literary studies because it enables in-depth exploration of textual meaning, symbolic representation, and emotional nuance that cannot be quantified statistically. The primary data source of this research is the poem *Thank You Mom* by Miller Mottla, which is treated as a self-contained literary text for close textual examination.

Data were collected through intensive close reading, a critical technique widely used in literary scholarship to analyze how meaning is constructed through linguistic and structural elements. This method allows the researcher to identify patterns of expression, stylistic choices, and thematic development embedded within the poem. The analytical focus is directed toward intrinsic literary elements, including theme, diction, imagery, tone, repetition, contrast, and moral values, as these components form the structural foundation through which poetic meaning is generated.

The analysis follows an interpretative procedure consisting of three stages. First, textual identification is conducted to locate significant lines, phrases, and stylistic features related to the themes of maternal love and gratitude. Second, contextual interpretation is applied to examine how these textual elements interact to produce emotional and ethical significance. Third, integrative analysis is performed to synthesize findings and determine how intrinsic elements collectively construct the poem's representation of maternal affection and moral awareness.

To enhance analytical rigor, interpretive validity is maintained through theoretical triangulation, in which interpretations are supported by established literary theories and critical perspectives from recognized scholars. This procedure ensures that conclusions are grounded in scholarly frameworks rather than subjective impressions. By applying this systematic qualitative approach, the study aims to provide a structured and academically reliable interpretation of the poem's thematic and moral dimensions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
A. *Representation of Maternal Love*

The analysis reveals that maternal love is constructed in the poem as a constant, protective, and self-sacrificing force that shapes the speaker's emotional development. This representation is evident in the line, *"You were always there when I was sad and afraid,"* where the adverb *always* functions as a lexical marker of permanence. Linguistically, this choice reinforces the idea of maternal presence as unwavering and reliable, suggesting that maternal affection operates as a stable emotional foundation. Such portrayal aligns with literary perspectives that position maternal figures as symbols of security and moral grounding within familial narratives (Guerin et al., 2011).

Maternal devotion is further emphasized through the line, *"You gave your time and love to help me grow."* The verb *gave* denotes voluntary sacrifice and highlights the mother's willingness to prioritize the child's development over her own needs. From a stylistic standpoint, the simplicity of diction strengthens

emotional immediacy, demonstrating that poetic power can emerge from linguistic clarity rather than ornamental complexity. This supports Perrine's (1992) assertion that poetic effectiveness often lies in expressive sincerity rather than elaborate figurative construction.

Collectively, these textual elements construct maternal love not merely as an emotional state but as an active moral force that shapes identity formation. The poem thus portrays motherhood as both relational and formative, emphasizing its influence on personal growth and ethical awareness.

B. Expression of Gratitude

Gratitude functions as the central emotional response in the poem and serves as a thematic counterpart to maternal love. This is most explicitly expressed in the line, *"Thank you, Mom, for everything you have done."* The phrase *everything you have done* suggests totality, indicating that the speaker perceives maternal contributions as immeasurable. Rather than listing specific acts, the poem employs generalization, which universalizes the emotional experience and allows readers to project their own familial memories onto the text.

Another line, *"I am who I am because of you,"* demonstrates how gratitude evolves into moral recognition. Here, identity is presented as relationally constructed, implying that the speaker's personal qualities are inseparable from maternal influence. This reinforces Eagleton's (2007) view that poetry transforms private emotion into shared human meaning. Gratitude therefore functions not only as a personal expression but also as an ethical acknowledgment of formative relational influence.

Through these expressions, the poem frames gratitude as an awareness of dependence, highlighting the speaker's recognition that personal growth is inseparable from maternal care. Such representation positions gratitude as both an emotional response and a moral realization.

C. Moral Dimension of the Poem

Beyond emotional expression, the poem conveys a clear ethical dimension through its portrayal of gratitude, respect, and selflessness. The speaker's acknowledgment of maternal sacrifice reflects a moral perspective in which love is understood as an act of devotion rather than mere sentiment. This ethical orientation supports Wellek and Warren's (1956) proposition that literature reflects universal human values and encourages moral reflection.

The poem also illustrates how emotional expression contributes to relational strength. By openly articulating love and appreciation, the speaker demonstrates emotional awareness, suggesting that verbal acknowledgment of affection plays a crucial role in sustaining interpersonal bonds. This idea positions the poem as more than a lyrical statement; it functions as an ethical text that models relational values for readers.

Importantly, the moral dimension of the poem is conveyed through linguistic simplicity rather than symbolic abstraction. This indicates that accessibility can enhance ethical communicability, allowing readers from diverse backgrounds to engage with the poem's message. In this sense, the poem exemplifies how literature can operate as a form of moral education, reinforcing the argument that poetic texts may serve pedagogical as well as aesthetic purposes.

D. Interpretative Synthesis

When examined holistically, the intrinsic elements of the poem—diction, tone, imagery, and thematic structure—interact to construct a unified representation of maternal love as the source, gratitude as the response, and moral awareness as the outcome. This triadic relationship demonstrates that emotional experience, ethical recognition, and literary expression are interconnected rather than separate dimensions.

The findings therefore suggest that poetic simplicity should not be interpreted as aesthetic limitation. Instead, the poem illustrates how straightforward language can intensify emotional resonance and enhance interpretive clarity. Such results challenge the assumption that literary value is necessarily tied to structural complexity and support the view that accessible poetry can hold significant emotional and moral depth.

4.   CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *Thank You Mom* constructs maternal love as a foundational emotional and ethical force that shapes the speaker's identity, psychological stability, and moral awareness. Through linguistic simplicity and direct expression, the poem portrays the mother not merely as a figure of affection but as a formative presence whose care, sacrifice, and guidance function as essential elements in the speaker's personal development. The analysis confirms that maternal love in the poem operates as an active moral influence rather than a passive emotional state.

The findings further reveal that gratitude serves as the central thematic response to this maternal devotion. Rather than functioning as a conventional expression of thanks, gratitude is represented as a form of

ethical recognition that acknowledges the mother's enduring role in shaping the speaker's character. In this sense, gratitude becomes a reflective realization of relational dependence and emotional maturity.

Importantly, the study establishes that the poem's moral dimension emerges from the interaction between maternal love and gratitude. These themes operate in a relational structure in which maternal affection functions as the source, gratitude as the response, and moral awareness as the interpretative outcome. This triadic relationship demonstrates that poetic texts can simultaneously convey emotional experience, ethical reflection, and relational meaning.

Theoretically, this research contributes to literary studies by challenging the assumption that poetic value is necessarily tied to structural or symbolic complexity. The analysis shows that linguistic simplicity can enhance emotional accessibility and strengthen moral communicability, thereby expanding the understanding of how poetic texts function within ethical discourse. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings support the view that poetry can serve as a medium of moral education, capable of fostering empathy, relational awareness, and ethical reflection among readers.

In conclusion, *Thank You Mom* exemplifies how accessible poetic language can convey profound emotional and moral significance. The poem illustrates that simplicity in poetic form does not limit interpretative depth; rather, it may intensify affective resonance and ethical clarity. This study therefore reinforces the broader argument that poetry should be recognized not only as an aesthetic construct but also as a meaningful educational medium that shapes emotional intelligence and moral consciousness.

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