
The presence of the absent mother in Gerbrand Bakker's novel *Perenbomen bloeien wit*

Mathias Schäffer
BA German with Dutch
University of Sheffield

Gerbrand Bakker's *Perenbomen bloeien wit* provides an exceptional literary example of an all male family trying to deal with the issue of motherlessness following the sudden and unforeseen departure of the mother from their family. Gerard, his twin sons, Klaas and Kees, and his youngest son, Gerson, learn that Marian, Gerard's wife and the boys' mother, has left for Italy to be with another man. Years later, whilst travelling in the family car to visit the children's grandparents, the family is involved in a car crash, as a result of which Gerson permanently loses his sight and is temporarily comatose. In the weeks following this catastrophic episode, Gerson, Klaas, Kees and Gerard struggle to adjust to their new lives to such an extent that Gerson eventually commits suicide by drowning himself in the lake behind his grandparents' house. Although the mother is seldom spoken about during the novel, Bakker gives this absent figure a noticeable presence throughout his book. This essay will first seek to outline the essence of philosopher Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist theory of trace, and offer a suggestion as to how this theory might be applied to Bakker's formation of a presence of the absent mother in *Perenbomen bloeien wit*. This essay will then also focus on discussing the presence of the absent mother as experienced through Bakker's use of metaphor and symbolism, applying the theory of 'trace' where appropriate.

In *Living to Learn Finally: The Last Interview*, philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote:

I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: It is impossible to escape this structure... Each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, "proceeds" from me, unable to be reappropriated... One expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind. Who is going to inherit, and how?¹

According to Derrida, it must be the case that when applying this theory to *Perenbomen bloeien wit*, there will remain traces of the presence of the absent mother. It is trace that signifies the presence of the absence of the mother: "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself."² Bakker rarely writes explicitly about the mother in his novel, and the family seldom talk about her, however it is through trace, often found in metaphor and symbolism, that she is referred to. We "inherit", and are "entrusted", with what is left behind when she leaves.

The very first chapter heading "Zwart" could be seen as a metaphor for trace. In this sense of the word, "zwart" is chosen by Gerson as a name to describe a game played by the three brothers in which they must find a designated object/person/place in the vicinity of their

¹Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2007), pp. 32-33.

²Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison, (Evanston: North-western University Press, 1973), p. 156.

home whilst keeping their eyes firmly shut so as not to be able to see their surroundings. 'Zwart', translated into English as 'black', is described as "... colourless from the absence or complete absorption of light."³ Using this definition, it is arguable that Bakker uses the colour black as a metaphor for presence of the absence of the mother. Despite the fact that she has almost completely disappeared (with the exception of a handful of impersonal cards each year⁴), her presence can still be felt, just as the colour black can still be seen in the absence of all light. It is this absence of light that is representative of Derrida's 'trace'. It is not present, yet it refers beyond itself to the absence of the presence of light. This metaphor continues throughout the book, as the reader reencounters 'zwart' when Gerson is lying in a coma in hospital. The reader gains access to Gerson's perspective and thoughts as he lies unconscious in the hospital, and Gerson describes what he can see: "*Het is zwart. Echt. Zwart, niet ik-knijp-mijn-ogen-dicht-dus-het-is-donker-zwart.*"⁵

Gerson's coma in itself could also serve as a metaphor for the presence of the absent mother. Here, it could be suggested that an unconscious Gerson is representative of the absent mother figure. As Klaas, Kees, and Gerard look on at the unconscious body of Gerson, I would argue that the most explicit metaphor demonstrating the presence of the absent mother figure can be found when Bakker writes as follows:

Hij was er – hij was het middelpunt, zou je kun zeggen – maar hij was er ook niet. Het is moeilijk uit te leggen. Alles draaide om Gerson, maar hij was onzichtbaar, hij leek verdwenen te zijn. Al seen afwezige hoofdrolspeler in een film.⁶

As afore mentioned, Gerson acts as the absent mother figure here. It should be mentioned that it is of great significance that Harald, the nurse who looks after Gerson during his time in hospital, is also present at this moment; there are still four male characters looking at the absent figure who lies at the heart of the plot. The 'wij' narrator also notices this, and writes "Nu voelden we het merkwaardig was om vier mannen rond een bed te staan en te praten over iemand die in dat bed ligt."⁷ Just as the father and three sons feel the presence of the absent mother figure, there are four males surrounding the absent figure lying in front of them. This adds strength to the notion that the trace of the absent mother figure can be strongly felt through the metaphor that is Gerson's coma. Derrida's 'trace', can be found in the absence of Gerard's consciousness.

There are two additional ways in which the presence of the absent mother can be felt in the period of the book where Gerson lies in a coma. The first of which is demonstrated through the phenomena of 'waiting' and 'hope'. When Gerard finds out that Gerson is in a coma, he says "Ik hou niet van wachten, wachten vreet aan je."⁸ Although there appears to be no evidence suggesting that this is a reference to the fact that Gerard might be waiting in the hope that Marian, his wife, might one day return to the family, that fact that he later also

³ Angus Stevenson and Lesley Brown, eds., *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: Volume 1*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 243.

⁴ Gerbrand Bakker, *Perenbomen bloeien wit*, (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Cossee, 2007). p. 11.

⁵ *ibid.* p. 49.

⁶ *ibid.* pp. 41-42.

⁷ *ibid.* p. 41.

⁸ *ibid.* p. 41.

says “Ze moet op een dag terugkomen. Ze kan niet voor eeuwig wegblijven”⁹ suggests that he does indeed think there is small chance that she might come back. Whilst Gerson is unconscious, Klaas says “Gerson, je moet terugkeren naar dit leven.”¹⁰ Working on the assumption that an unconscious Gerson is representative of the absent mother, the similarity between this wish for Gerson to return to consciousness and Gerard’s hopeful wait for Marian to return home, strongly supports the idea that the presence of the absent mother manifests itself in the metaphor of Gerson’s coma.

The final way in which the presence of the absent mother is felt whilst Gerson is in a coma can be seen through Gerard’s apparent guilt. He says to both Klaas and Kees “Jullie kunnen toch net als ik zien dat Gerson heel ver weg is. En het was mijn schuld, ik heb niet opgeled en daarom ligt hij nu hier en wordt misschien wel nooit meer wakker.”¹¹ (It can be seen here again, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, that Gerard has not yet given up the hope that Marian may come back through the word ‘misschien’.) It can be argued that, with this sentence, Gerard feels guilty for not paying enough attention to his marriage, and that as a result, his wife has left and might never come back. Gerard expresses that he could have paid more attention to driving and prevented the accident and consequently Gerson’s coma and blindness. Bakker’s demonstration of Gerard’s guilt, and utilisation of the accident and Gerson’s coma as a metaphor for Marian’s decision to leave, leaves us to experience the presence of the absent mother.

In order to create a presence of the absent mother, Bakker also uses the symbol of the car. The reader learns that the mother leaves to Italy with “de grote glazende”¹², and that the family is left with the “snotkleurige auto”¹³. It could be suggested that the loss of the big, shiny car is symbolic of the loss of the mother, and that the remaining old, snot-coloured car is representative of the broken, incomplete family that remains. In fact, the absence of the larger family car could be interpreted to be an yet another example of ‘trace’ in that, despite it no longer being there, it’s presence is inferred by it’s absence. As previously suggested, the change of cars could be said to be a metaphor for changes in the life of the family, and the absence of the larger car, a metaphor for the departure of the mother. The sentence “Vier mannen in een oude brik”¹⁴ describes the new situation of Gerson, Klaas, Kees and Gerson aptly. This idea is corroborated by the fact that Gerard looks after his car and washes it every Saturday, just as, week in week out, he attempts to look after his family in the absence of his wife. Despite this, the children desperately crave the attentions of their mother: “We weten niet of het kan, maar als het kan, dan hield Gerard van zijn snotkleurige auto... Maar we, en Gerson ook, hielden liever van moeder.”¹⁵ Here, the father is able to serve the material needs of the family, which are often expected of the father in a traditional family environment.¹⁶ The mother’s absence is apparent here, with Gerard struggling to nurture his children in an emotional way, which is in society so often seen to

⁹ *ibid.* p. 97.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.47.

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 53.

¹² *ibid.* p. 11.

¹³ *ibid.* p. 15.

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 14.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 16.

¹⁶ Richard L. Meth and Robert S. Pasick, eds., *Men in Therapy: The Challenge of Change*, (New York: Guildford, 1990). p. 58.

be a feminine trait.¹⁷ Kris Kissman and Jo Ann Allen put this problem down to socialization, and write in their book that traditionally many men are brought up largely to serve the material needs of the family, and that this “model can fail them when unexpectedly life turns them into parents who must provide nurturing and emotional closeness for their children”¹⁸. Victor George and Paul Wilding, in their book *Motherless Families*, state following the loss of a mother, “the most common type of loss was emotional ... This is in line with the generally held public belief that... the mother’s unique contribution to the children’s well-being is mainly emotional and affectional.”¹⁹ The absence of this emotional support is noticeable however, and serves to be seen as another trace of the presence of the absent mother. Following the accident, the “snotkleurige autootje was total loss, het had geen zin met hem om te knappen.”²⁰ As a result, the family receives a new, blue car, signifying yet another change in their lives, another period of adjustment coinciding with Gerson becoming blind. This gives further strength to the interpretation that Bakker uses this symbolisation of the car to represent change in the family’s life.

A final way in which the presence of the absent mother is experienced in *Perenbomen bloeien wit* is through the absence of physical affection. Physical affection towards one’s children is widely seen in society as something that a mother should provide to a greater extent than the father.²¹ Kissman and Allen provide an example of this attitude in a case study of a single father they call Don W. The exchange reads as follows:

As Don W. explained to his son, “I often feel like hugging you. Something holds me back. My dad always just shook hands with me. Hugging is something I’ll have to learn. This was in response to his son’s saying that one thing he missed about living with his mother was “the hugs”.²²

In *Perenbomen bloeien wit*, the presence of the absent mother can be seen through both the absence and the occasional presence of touch. Klaas, Kees, Harald and Daan all play a large role in providing the physical affection for Gerson that he so misses from his mother. Significantly, the father does not provide this. After Klaas strokes Gerson’s arm as he lies in a coma “zijn linkerarm was in die anderhalfuur helemaal warm en rozig geworden.”²³ During his coma, he can feel Daan: “Een grote, natte lap op mijn gezicht. Een gesnuif in mijn oren. Iets was springt in mijn borst, of op mijn borst. Een bepaalde druk, een zwaarte, koorte tikjes, stappen misschien, op mijn schoot.”²⁴ Finally, after Gerson has regained consciousness, as Harald is brushing his hair he says, “Het voelt lekker als hij mijn haar borstelt, mijn hand vastpakt, me over mijn borst wrijft.”²⁵ This physical affection brings more consciousness and comfort to Gerson. Assuming that this affection would normally be

¹⁷ Kris Kissman and Jo Ann Allen, *Single-Parent Families*, (Newbury Park: Sage Publications Inc., 1993). pp. 114-115.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 114.

¹⁹ Victor George and Paul Wilding, *Motherless Families*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1972). p. 64.

²⁰ Bakker, p. 73.

²¹ Kissman and Allen, pp. 114-115.

²² *ibid.* p. 115.

²³ Bakker, p. 48.

²⁴ *ibid.* p. 52.

²⁵ *ibid.* p. 66.

shown by the mother, we experience her presence even in her absence due to the fact that other characters are having to provide this in her place.

It can be concluded that the remarkable strength with which Bakker is able to create a presence of the absent mother is achieved largely through using metaphor and symbolisation as seen with Gerson's coma, the different cars, and the forms (such as Harald and Daan) which show physical affection. However, the presence of the absent mother is explained further by applying Derrida's philosophy of trace. Trace that is found in the absence of consciousness during Gerson's coma, the absence of both physical affection and emotional support from the father, and the absence of light from the colour black. What is fascinating throughout *Perenbomen bloeien wit* is that it is absence, not presence, which provides meaning and substance to the presence of yet more absence. In order to explore and understand this idea further, a more in depth investigation into Derrida's deconstructionism is required.

Bibliography

Primary Literature

Bakker, Gerbrand, *Perenbomen bloeien wit*, (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Cossee, 2007).

Secondary Literature

Derrida, Jacques, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2007).

Derrida, Jacques, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison, (Evanston: North-western University Press, 1973).

George, Victor and Wilding, Paul, *Motherless Families*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1972).

Kissman, Kris and Allen, Jo Ann, *Single-Parent Families*, (Newbury Park: Sage Publications Inc., 1993).

Meth, Richard L. and Pasick, Robert S., eds., *Men in Therapy: The Challenge of Change*, (New York: Guildford, 1990).

Naas, Michael, 'When it Comes to Mourning', in *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts*, ed. by C. Colebrook, (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 113-121.

Silverman, Hugh J, 'Heidegger: Derrida, Heidegger, and the Time of the Line', in *Continental Philosophy II: Derrida and Deconstruction*, ed. by H.J. Silverman, (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 154-168.

Stevenson, Angus and Brown, Lesley, eds., *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: Volume 1*, 6th edn., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).