

EFPP Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Review

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**MATER AMANTISSIMA
Of thread and embroidery.
Bonds of love and repair through art**

12/2021

Abstract

In this article and through the tossing and turning that precedes sleep, my mind refers me to an artistic and familiar world with the evocation of a childhood memory. With the creative thread, I reveal different forms of love taking shape through art, mythology and popular wisdom. The thread is revealed as a symbol of creativity and restoration, referring me back to the original thread: the umbilical cord, a sacred thread through which we begin, linked to our mother, unfolding in this world. Later the imaginary threads arrive, such as crying and creative capacity. Mater Amantissima: first bond of love, origin of creativity, art and repair.

Keywords

Mater amantissima, arte, vínculos de amor y reparación, creatividad, hilo, cordón umbilical.

Resumen

En este artículo y mediante el duermevela que precede al sueño, mi mente me remite a un universo artístico y familiar con la evocación de un recuerdo de infancia. Con el hilo creativo pongo de manifiesto diferentes formas de amor que se materializan a través del arte, de la mitología y de la sabiduría popular. El hilo se desvela como símbolo de creatividad y restauración, remitiéndome al hilo original: el cordón umbilical, hilo sagrado a través del cual iniciamos -vinculados a la madre- nuestro despliegue en este mundo. Posteriormente llegaron los hilos imaginarios, entre ellos el llanto y la capacidad creativa. Mater Amantissima: primer vínculo de amor, origen de creatividad, arte y reparación.

Palabras clave

Mater amantissima, arte, vínculos de amor y reparación, creatividad, hilo, cordón umbilical.

Familiarium.

I close my eyes and, in the tossing and turning that precedes sleep, my mind evokes a precise, sweet family scene full of emotion and closely linked to the past: my mother... the threads... a creative act, embroidery... It is one of my most remote memories, vivid and heartfelt: Mum sewing in the room where she used to do it, listening to the voice of a radio announcer who came to the house every day at the same time. It is winter and the light is dim. The standard lamp illuminates our small, warm room, and a tiny beam of light focuses on the magical space where she tirelessly embroiders. The smell of starch mingles with coffee as I, barely four years old, lie on the carpet leaning on my black dog, delighting in first messing up and then tidying an unending army of infinitely coloured threads. A world of shades unfolds before me, hypnotically concentrating all my childish care. I caress the threads my mother uses to sew. I organise them by shades, concentrating on the action of doing so: vermilion, cadmium red, maroon, coral... fuchsia pink and pale pink... copper, light oranges and dark oranges, then come the ochres and yellows: straw, lemon yellow, saffron... then greens: olive, emerald green, grass green, lemon green and turquoise (light and dark)... blues: light blue, indigo, indigo, cerulean... violet and lilac, purple, crimson, plum and mauve...

Each of my mother's threads was carefully wound on its own spool waiting patiently for her to unwind them as she used them in her work, while I took pleasure in sorting them by chromatic shades. My experience of the familiar is nourished by this curious allegory and, immersed in a feminine world, it springs from three essential foundations: mother (the original essence), threads (symbol and universal image of connection, bond and repair) and the action of embroidering colours (a creative act and metaphorical premonition of my artistic and therapeutic vocations).

Filum. Creatio. Mater.

There is a beautiful meaning to each of the threads and each of the colours. The Spanish word hilo, which means thread, comes from the Latin word filum and refers to a thin, elongated strand of a textile material.



Arandes Batalla, Angels: El darrer brodat
(The last embroidery) (1991).

Threads are used to sew, join two or more pieces together, or mend a garment by darning it. Thread binds and repairs when sewing, restores when darning, creates when weaving and embellishes when embroidering. Clothing is usually made from joining threads, as textile fibres consist of these strands. In a more specific sense, we speak of needle and thread clothing when garments are made from hemp or linen. Silkworms and spiders also produce thread by creating their cocoons and webs. Spinning, weaving and embroidery mean being associated with the creative work. In Greek mythology, the Moiras – Chloto, Lachesis and Atropos – represented as spinners, were personifications of Fate. They wore white tunics and their function was to regulate the life of each mortal, from birth to death, using a thread that the first one spun, the second one wound, and the third one cut at the end of the person's existence. They lived in the realm of Hades, to which they were drawn across the Styx. They appeared three nights after the birth of a child to determine the course of their life. The symbolism of the thread is essentially that of an agent binding all states of existence to one other and to their beginning: the thread links this world to the others and to all beings.

The umbilical cord is our original thread – the primordial connection with the mother through which we are bound to life. The different psychoanalytical

schools – all focused on investigating the presence of unconscious conflicts and the repression of instinct – agree on the utmost importance of the maternal function in the balanced development of a person.

I rescue from oblivion the early legacies I received that weave a strong but light cloth which shaped not only my **imaginary** but also my real. Among the threads that wrapped me throughout my childhood, the umbilical cord that tied me to my mother is the first and the most important: a physical tie from which each one of us begins to construct and differentiate ourselves, emerging as individual beings from the essence of the familiar. Nothing is closer or more familiar than the maternal bond embodied by this **sacred thread**.

In the first months of life, consciousness, which is transcendental for our species, gradually appears, alerting us to the fact that we are unique beings, differentiated from the woman who has brought us into the world. Babies, who initially cried out of discomfort, hunger or sleep, also cry out of loneliness, painfully realising they are different beings from their mother. Separation and isolation anxieties appear. By crying, babies try to launch an imaginary thread to construct their first bond in the absence of the umbilical cord.

That's where reciprocity begins. Babies' efforts to create a link with their cry – with their demand for love – take their mother directly and unconsciously back to the first cry she once cried and, in the best of cases, awaken a deep empathy through which the differentiation between the two beings begins to be woven. On the other hand, there is also the certainty that the child's entire network of future relationships depends on this act of distancing, managed with love. A mother capable of containing crying and pain, with enough capacity to give meaning to the unnameable, will identify with the baby: **"That's me, transforming myself with every cry"**. The new being will come to realise that life consists above all of precisely that: **the symbolic threads we throw out to others and which those others offer us, mutually transforming one another.**

My mother embellished each of the fabrics she touched with her embroidery. Thanks to her action, something basic took on a new meaning with the magic of patiently applied colours: a tiny set of sheets to tuck in the first dreams of a new-born baby; a white dress with golden appliqué to girdle the body of a happy bride... The threads she deftly handled gave form to love and details, personalising the undifferentiated. I grew up with the multi-coloured creations of the threads embroidered by Mum's hand... and as we distanced ourselves from our primordial nexus, many other **allegorical threads** were formed to unite us. I keep her last unfinished work framed – the one she was embroidering when her illness and the end of her days came. She was then 53 years old and her unfinished work is beautiful and full of meaning: life and death on the same stage. Life manifests itself in the bright colour of finished flowers and fruits; Death appears in the sadder ones that remained unfinished, when Atropos decided to cut the subtle thread that united her to existence. **"There is always something left to finish,"** she would tell me, in a faint voice...

I evoke the work of the artist Louise Bourgeois, who symbolised her mother with large spiders representing both the idea of shelter and of inner space: patient, hardworking, indispensable weavers... Fabrics and threads also played an important role in the artist's

life. She grew up surrounded by the textiles from her parents' upholstery restoration shop, and, by the age of 12, she was helping in the business by drawing the missing areas that needed to be repaired. For much of her life she collected clothing and household items, such as tablecloths, napkins, sheets, and, since the mid-1990s, she has been cutting them up and sewing them back together, transforming these everyday materials into art. Through sewing, she tried to achieve psychological healing: "I have always feared being separated and abandoned. Sewing is my attempt to keep things cohesive and whole [...] My mother would sit in the sun and set about repairing a tapestry or a **petit point**. She really loved her job. This same sense of repair lies deep within me." (Bourgeois, 2002).



Bourgeois, Louise. Maman. 1999.
Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao

I remember Maria, a patient who, suffering from a chronic psychotic disorder, began, carefully and with selfless dedication, to embroider each of the strange beings that appeared in her delusions. They all had an identity, which was also embroidered on their feet. It was through her peculiar work that she was able to first give form to the more terrifying demons that intermittently afflicted her, and then name them. She thus began a process of improvement in her symptoms, demonstrating the power of creativity: the **therapeutic thread.**

Actions such as sewing, spinning, knitting, darning and embroidering are linked to the concepts of joining, repairing, weaving and embellishing... and in a peculiar way allude to the mother as an integrating agent while also alluding metaphorically to love, beauty, the passage of time, and the beginning and end of existence.

Our cultural heritage exhaustively illustrates this through children's stories, mythological tales and poetic or visual creations.

The princess **Snow White**, from the Grimm Brothers' fairy tale, is the result of the wish expressed by her mother when she pricks her finger with the needle she was using to embroider. The effect of the red colour on the white snow was so beautiful that the queen exclaimed "I wish I had a girl as white as snow, with lips as red as blood and whose hair was as black as ebony" (Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, 2011). Her wish was granted, which is why the princess, whose birth caused the death of her mother, was named Snow White.

Aurora, the princess in Charles Perrault's **Sleeping Beauty**, a tale also popularised by the Brothers Grimm, hurt herself at the age of 15 when she was spinning with a spinning wheel, falling into a magical dream from which she would awaken with the first kiss of true love. With a very interesting allegorical charge, even the three fairies who replace the princess's mother to accompany during her childhood – Flora, Fauna and Merryweather – seem to represent a free version of the Moiras.

Ariadne managed to save Theseus thanks to the **mythological thread**. The myth of Theseus and Ariadne's thread tells, among other things, how love offers us a way of overcoming our monsters and finding the way out of labyrinths. She gave him beloved a ball of golden yarn whose thread he unravelled to avoid getting lost as he advanced through the labyrinth after slaying the Minotaur.

Penelope, another character from Greek mythology, is the tireless weaver. She represents selflessness and fidelity, but also cunning and the ability to deceive as tools to achieve her purposes. Penelope is the model of the self-sacrificing woman who keeps quiet and waits. She is forced to make and unmake her own work over

and over again while her lost love is on his way home. Her tapestry configures that vicious circle of resistance, as she believed her husband was alive and would return, and her attitude was established by Western culture as the ideal for a wife. The feminine appears as ambiguous, unreliable and, therefore, dangerous terrain.

The Madonna of the Yarnwinder is the title of at least three oil paintings made by copying a lost original by Leonardo da Vinci. In this work, Jesus, as a child, looks longingly at a wheel his mother, Mary, is using to spin. The wheel symbolises both Mary's domestic character and the Cross on which Christ was crucified. The original painting was commissioned by the Secretary of State of Louis XII of France in 1501 and refers to the mythological Moiras.

La Balanguera, considered to be the national anthem of Majorca, is an adaptation of a poem by Joan Alcover, who, in turn, was inspired by a popular old Majorcan nursery rhyme. **La Balanguera** can again be assimilated to the figure of the Moiras, as her duty is to weave the future, and she is endowed with supernatural wisdom:

"Oh mysterious Balanguera,
like a spider of subtle art,
her spinning wheel empties,
and pulls the thread from our lives.
Like a reaper she ponders
and sews tomorrow's cloth.
La Balanguera spins and spins,
La Balanguera will spin.
Turning her gaze behind her
she looks into the ancestral shades,
and knows where the seed
of new spring is hidden.
She knows the stump climbs higher
when deeper it can root.
La Balanguera spins and spins,
La Balanguera will spin." [...]

(Joan Alcover, 1854-1926)

Vivarium. Artem.

The way that Francisca Artigues, the nonagenarian mother of the international artist Miquel Barceló has been embroidering her son's watercolour drawings on to tablecloths, napkins, bedspreads and curtains for hundreds of hours and for more than 20 years, is touching. Between September 2018 and January 2019, the Royal Botanical Garden of Madrid, hosted the exhibition **Vivarium, Embroideries by Francisca Artigues on drawings by Miquel Barceló**, a compilation of 13 of her large-format embroideries and more than 30 watercolour drawings by her son. Francisca and Miquel, born in Majorca, **integrate family ties and art through watercolours, embroidery and threads.**



Artigues F., Barceló, M. **Vivarium**. 2018

The umbilical cord that initially united them has been transformed into a beautiful joint creation with which they take us back to their primordial nexus, producing

an amazing shared family world. At the opening of **Vivarium**, Barceló commented that when the idea of the exhibition came up he was reluctant to show the work precisely because it is such an intimate, family affair between him and his mother, but he ended up enjoying it when he saw how happy she was. He recalled that Francisca started embroidering long before he was walking, and also that she stopped painting when he was born. A. Anaut, Director of **La Fábrica**, defined this exhibition as "a love story, of a mother and son united by a thread, like the one woven by Ariadne. Only that on this occasion this double cordoncillo thread – **Majorcan stitch** – covers Barceló's work, and Francisca is the artist". (Anaut, 2018).

The name **Vivarium** comes from a large 444 x 244 cm tapestry Francisca worked on for more than two years. From green and blue stains generated by Barceló she embroidered a whole series of creatures that emerge and join together, creating a work in which everything is alive and is transformed. The inspiration is given by nature and the Mediterranean as forest and water come together. Octopuses spit ink and play with a computer while drinking a bottle of wine, coexisting with starfish and corals, deep-sea fish, tiny dragons, water lilies, palm trees and exotic birds. We see insects: grasshoppers, ants and flying dragonflies; there are also raucous cockerels, discreet sardines, dwarf elephants, hooks and primitive hunting tools, frightening frogs and bats, and primates wounded by arrows accompanied by ancestral turtles... It is a pure explosion of life so characteristic of Miquel Barceló's energetic, ferocious work recreated and nuanced by Francisca, who generates a new work made, stitch by stitch, to delight our eyes. In the words of Clon Tibin:

"Francisca's work is made with infinite patience. She does not need to disguise the time it takes her. It is the image trapped in stillness. It is the shape of the known world, made for contemplation [] In her son's version of the world, she sees her own shadow, as if her own eyes and her own hands and her own body and the

mind that accompanies her in life have gone out of her, exiled to another realm where, with enormous security and an impressive breadth of vision, they both produce images and work with paint and clay, or simply dream of what existence might be [] She owes him nothing and does not seek to protect him; the years have separated them. He knows how to take care of himself. But there is a connection between the two that transcends the bonds of blood and love.” (Artigues, F. and Barceló M., 2018).

Concludens.

Francisca manages to move us with her work, reinterpreting the work of the son who grew in her womb: a beautiful artistic gesture of generosity on both sides. With her work, Louise Bourgeois introduces us to the mother-spider and to the restorative and therapeutic capacity of the action of sewing, showing us a whole world of wide horizons ready for investigation, just as my patient, María, did. The mythological thread of Ariadne shows us love as a guide and Penelope, the tireless weaver, shows us selflessness and fidelity. Snow White was born from her mother's desire while she was sewing...

I connect with all of them, with the daughter I once was and with the mother I am. And, through them, I evoke my own mother embroidering: the essence of my family legacy and, as I mentioned at the beginning, the origin of my artistic and therapeutic vocations.

The meaning of the thread materializes in different forms of Love through Art, Mythology and popular Wisdom, symbolising the first of all threads, the umbilical cord – the sacred thread through which we begin, linked to our mother, our unfolding in this world: the Source of Life and Creativity: Mater amantissima.

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