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**SACRIFICE, SUBSTITUTION, AND BIBLICAL INTERTEXTUALITY IN ANNIE ERNAUX'S L'AUTRE FILLE** **Yang Hang**

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**ABSTRACT**

In *L'Autre fille* (The Other Girl), Annie Ernaux presents personal trauma and familial silence through the recollection of her deceased sister. Adopting biblical motifs as an analytical framework, this article examines the resonance of the narratives of Abel, Isaac, and Job within the text. The sister's early death echoes Abel's "innocent death," while subtle parental preference and psychological tension within the family reflect the dynamics of jealousy. Ernaux's position as the surviving child corresponds to Isaac's "logic of substitution," and writing functions as a form of compensation for the deceased. Her questioning of parental silence and the injustice of fate recalls Job's suffering and protest.

These motifs not only provide a symbolic structure for the work but also situate private memory within a broader cultural horizon, thereby establishing an intertextual relationship between individual and collective experience. This study argues that the autobiographical writing in *L'Autre fille* constructs a bridge between literature, interiority, and religion, enabling private trauma to acquire cultural and ethical intelligibility. In doing so, it demonstrates the capacity of autobiographical literature to transform individual experience into a universal human predicament.

**Keywords:** Annie Ernaux; *L'Autre fille*; biblical motifs; intertextuality; universal experience.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

Annie Ernaux's *L'Autre fille* (2011) takes the form of a letter addressed to her deceased sister, yet it extends far beyond the boundaries of private correspondence. As a significant component of her autobiographical project, the book confronts one of the most concealed traumas in the family's history: the death of her elder sister before Ernaux's birth, an event long sealed within familial silence. The sister's absence and unspeakability shape the author's identity from the outset under the shadow of survivorship. *L'Autre fille* is not merely an act of personal remembrance, but also a challenge to forgetting and taboo, exemplifying Ernaux's consistent literary stance of confronting trauma and dismantling identity through writing.

Religious language permeates the text, and biblical motifs structure it intertextually throughout. This intertextuality is evident at the level of lexical fields: Ernaux repeatedly employs religious vocabulary such as "sin," "purity," "saint," and "resurrection," constructing a semantic network centered on faith and morality. Through this network, the text continually resonates with the Bible at a latent symbolic level. The concept of intertextuality was first articulated by the French literary critic Julia Kristeva, who, inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, reconceptualized textual interaction as a dialogue among texts. In her essay "Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman," she famously asserted that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another"

(Kristeva, 1969, p. 145). Intertextuality thus becomes a powerful critical tool, one that “reveals and clarifies the process by which any text can be understood as a fusion and transformation of one or more other texts” (de Biasi, 1989, p. 389). As a foundational source of Western cultural symbolism, biblical narratives provide a universally recognizable interpretive framework through which individual experience may be linked to collective cultural memory.

In *L'Autre fille*, the Bible is not merely part of a religious background but serves as a structural and affective support for the narrative itself. The recurrence of biblical motifs is far from incidental. On the one hand, Ernaux grew up in a social environment deeply shaped by Catholicism; in *Les Années*, she describes religion as “part of the museum of childhood” (Ernaux, 2008, p. 212). On the other hand, her sister’s premature death, her own survival, and her questioning of maternal silence naturally echo the biblical figures of Abel’s sacrifice, Isaac’s spared obedience, and Job’s protest. Through the transformation and occasional irony of these motifs, Ernaux converts personal trauma into a form of literary expression endowed with universal resonance. Her writing oscillates between prayer and interrogation, constructing a bridge between literature, interior life, and faith.

This article therefore examines the biblical motifs of Abel, Isaac, and Job in order to explore how *L'Autre fille* establishes a bridge between private memory and universal experience. Through intertextual dialogue with biblical narratives, Ernaux commemorates and symbolically compensates for the dead while simultaneously reflecting upon and questioning her identity as a survivor. Such writing represents not only a break from familial silence but also a modern rearticulation of the “Jobian question” in the face of injustice. By approaching the text from this perspective, the present study seeks to deepen our understanding of Ernaux’s poetics of trauma and to open new avenues of reflection on the dialogue between autobiographical literature and religious culture.

## 2. JEALOUSY AND INNOCENCE: ABEL AND THE SISTER’S FATE

In the Book of Genesis, the story of Abel and Cain constitutes a classic narrative of innocence and jealousy: Abel is favored by God because his offering is accepted, whereas Cain, whose sacrifice is rejected, kills his brother out of envy. This story highlights the powerlessness of the innocent in the face of jealousy and violence and establishes the symbolic motif of the “innocent death” in Western culture. In *L'Autre fille*, Annie Ernaux enters into an intertextual dialogue with this biblical narrative, as her text repeatedly echoes the themes of innocence, jealousy, and death.

In *L'Autre fille*, Ernaux originally believed herself to be an only child, enjoying her parents’ undivided love. One day, however, she accidentally overhears a conversation between her mother and another woman and learns that before her birth there had been an older sister who died of diphtheria. Her mother remarks, “She died like a little saint” (Ernaux, 2011, p. 16). Yet her parents had always kept this matter shrouded in silence and never spoke of it to her. Coincidentally, when Ernaux herself was young, she nearly died of tetanus. Both sisters contracted deadly illnesses; one died, the other survived. Their fates form an unavoidable contrast:

“Only the first narrative—my foretold death and subsequent resurrection—counts in its effects on the second: your death and my unworthiness... I must confront this mysterious contradiction: you, the good little girl, the little saint, were not saved; and I, the devil, survived—not merely survived, but was miraculously saved” (Ernaux, 2011, p. 34).

Here the intertext with Cain and Abel becomes clear. Just as God chose Abel’s offering, Ernaux perceives that her parents—figured symbolically as God—had chosen her sister. Why does she see herself as “the devil”? Why does she feel “unworthy”? The answer lies in her

parents' attitudes. They never praised her as "lovable," whereas her mother once remarked that her deceased daughter "was more lovable than that one," referring to the narrator herself. Ernaux devotes several paragraphs to analyzing the word "lovable," repeating it anaphorically and probing its implications. She had long believed that being an only child proved she was loved; now she realizes: "The love I thought I had received was false" (Ernaux, 2011, p. 22).

Even sixty years later, she continues to grapple with the word's meaning:

"Between them and me, there is now you... invisible to others, loved, while I am rejected, pushed aside to make room for you. I am in the shadow; you soar in eternal light" (Ernaux, 2011, p. 21).

Such reflections reveal the profound trauma this discovery inflicted upon her. She eventually understands that if her sister had not died, she herself would not have been born:

"I came into the world because you died. I replaced you" (Ernaux, 2011, p. 61).

Although she survived, she was never truly "chosen."

The family's silence conceals a subtle preference and comparison that burdens the survivor with guilt and ambivalence. This psychological tension mirrors the jealousy in the Cain and Abel story. Yet unlike Cain, Ernaux is both jealous and a survivor shaped by maternal silence. The deceased sister becomes an Abel-like figure—innocent, beloved, and sacrificed—while Ernaux casts herself as Cain, filled with jealousy and rejection. Through this intertextual framework, Ernaux transforms private trauma into a symbolic structure that connects her sister's death to a broader cultural narrative of innocence and sacrifice. This emotional logic naturally leads to the Isaac motif: how does the survivor confront the fate of being "left behind"?

### 3. SUBSTITUTION AND SURVIVAL: ISAAC AND THE IDENTITY OF THE "OTHER DAUGHTER"

In Genesis, the story of Isaac centers on sacrifice and survival. Abraham, commanded by God, brings his son Isaac to Mount Moriah to be sacrificed, only to be stopped at the last moment. Isaac survives, yet his existence is forever marked by the near-sacrifice.

In *L'Autre fille*, Ernaux evokes this "destiny of survival" through her reference to Reiser's drawing *Le pont des enfants perdus* ("The Bridge of Lost Children"). The image depicts a father leading a child across a narrow bridge over an abyss, with broken planks behind and ahead—suggesting that one child has already fallen and another may soon follow. Ernaux implicitly identifies herself and her sister with these children: the first has fallen; the second survives but has walked along the edge of death.

Ernaux places herself in the position of a "survivor" or "substitute." Her sister's death makes her the child who remains, a symbolic Isaac. Like Isaac, her survival is not an act of will but the result of an inscrutable decree. She writes: "I did not live in their pain; I lived in your absence" (Ernaux, 2011, p. 56). Her existence seems founded upon her sister's death:

"It tries to make you the reason for my existence, to build my entire life upon your death" (Ernaux, 2011, p. 62).

Thus she resembles Isaac—a survivor defined forever by sacrifice.

Her internalization of suffering reflects this logic: she embraces voluntary hardship as a form of atonement, attempting to repay the "original sin" of survival (Ernaux, 2011, p. 63). Yet what torments her most is not death itself but her parents' silence:

"It was the first and the last time I heard them speak of you" (Ernaux, 2011, p. 43).

This silence functions as both protection and punishment. The sister is preserved as a sacred relic, inaccessible to the narrator, who can approach her only through writing.

Writing becomes a form of self-sacrifice:

“Writing you is only circling around your absence... You are an empty form that writing cannot fill” (Ernaux, 2011, p. 57).

Just as Isaac’s survival is inseparable from the shadow of sacrifice, Ernaux’s writing reenacts that sacrificial logic. Through the Isaac motif, she modernizes the ethics of survival: the survivor is not merely saved but eternally bound to the absence of the other. Writing becomes a renewed offering, a symbolic compensation for loss.

#### 4. SUFFERING AND QUESTIONING: JOB AND THE SURVIVOR’S DILEMMA

The Book of Job recounts the story of a righteous man who, after losing his family, property, and health, questions God: Why must the innocent suffer? God responds not with explanation but with the overwhelming language of creation. Job thus becomes a foundational metaphor for human confrontation with suffering and meaning.

Ernaux’s writing in *L’Autre fille* constitutes a similar “Job-like” questioning. She confronts not only her sister’s death but also her mother’s silence and the spiritual wound it inflicts. As Siobhán McIlvanney Day observes, Ernaux’s God is double: both the Catholic God of her upbringing and the maternal figure whose withheld love assumes divine authority (Day, 2007, p. 174). In this sense, her questioning is directed less at God than at her mother.

The trauma of overhearing her mother’s words and of being deemed less lovable becomes internalized, shaping her identity. Yet like Job, she does not erupt into open rebellion. Instead, she transforms her suffering into reflective writing. The absence of complete maternal love becomes the true source of anguish—a void that places her perpetually in the shadow of the “unchosen.”

Ernaux searches for the legitimacy of her existence: “In order to write” (Ernaux, 2011, p. 35). Writing becomes her means of redemption. Although it cannot restore the dead, it creates a space capable of holding pain and memory. As she writes:

“Writing you is only circling around your absence...” (Ernaux, 2011, p. 57).

Her questioning receives no direct answer. Yet through writing, she reconstructs her relationship to her sister and reclaims her own existence. Like Job, she does not obtain a rational solution but achieves a transformation of perspective. Her stance is not religious submission but literary perseverance: to oppose silence with language, to answer loss with memory.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Beginning with private memory, *L’Autre fille* continually invokes biblical symbolism. Through the layered motifs of Abel, Isaac, and Job, Ernaux transforms personal trauma into a universal spiritual experience. Abel’s innocent death illuminates the sister’s early demise and the hidden structure of jealousy and guilt; Isaac’s logic of substitution imbues survival with ethical tension, rendering writing a ritual of self-sacrifice; Job’s questioning of suffering turns silence into language and private grief into an inquiry into fate, memory, and meaning.

Through this intertextual engagement with biblical narratives, Ernaux articulates a modern posture of faith—not religious obedience, but literary commitment. In the face of silence and irresolution, she seeks meaning through language and resurrects lost life through memory. Writing becomes an ethical act, bearing witness and enabling individual memory to transcend private boundaries and enter collective cultural experience.

Thus, *L’Autre fille* is not merely a recollection of family secrecy but a response to the human condition itself. Amid jealousy, suffering, and silence, literature becomes a form of redemption.

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