“The Painter of Human Misery”¹:

Love and Suffering in Pablo Picasso’s *Mother and Child*

*Mother and Child*, painted circa 1901, is an oil on canvas portrait of a mother caressing her child. [Fig. 1] Spanning about 3 ½ feet by 3 feet, this painting is one of the largest works from Picasso’s Blue Period, the phase from 1901-1904 in which most of the artist’s works are characterized by melancholic shades of blue.² Suffering was a major aspect of Picasso’s life during this period, reflected in the predominance of images of the blind, the poor, and the sick. In fact, Picasso painted *Mother and Child* following a visit to the Saint-Lazare prison hospital in Paris that housed prostitutes, among other criminals and social outcasts.³ Regardless of whether he visited the prison for inspiration or to wallow in his grief, he sought out hardship and used it in his work. Using human subjects and layered symbolism, Picasso’s *Mother and Child* explores the complex relationships between love and misfortune.

A classic example of Picasso’s style during the Blue Period, *Mother and Child* is an organic depiction of motherly love in the face of suffering. A woman sits on the ground, slouched up against a wall in respite, with her baby lying comfortably in her arms. The mother is the most dominant figure in the painting, in part due to the fact that her body takes up most of the canvas. Her figure is almost disproportionate to the child’s

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small face, emphasizing her innate maternal strength. Thin, elongated hands and feet evoke the Spanish painter El Greco’s dramatic, expressionistic style. Critics have argued that the Blue Period was a crucial part of Picasso’s evolution as an artist. Influenced by El Greco’s approach to figures, Picasso explores his own artistic identity.

The iconic use of blue hues brings a melancholic mood to the portrait. Deep navy and ultramarine shades convey shadow, while baby blues add light. Blue is both visually and literally a rich color; historically blue pigment was made from ground lapis lazuli, which was imported from Afghanistan and thus very expensive. This choice contrasts with the subjects’ living conditions, as Picasso depicts poverty with luxury. The color is also deeply associated with subdued emotions, evoking sadness and tranquility in the viewer. These emotions seem to contradict each other, providing a starting point to explore love and suffering.

Furthermore, sharp contrasts between light and shadow add a sense of beauty, derived from the mother’s expression, to the image. Thick, unblended brushstrokes create a feeling of urgency, as if Picasso rushed to paint a moment before it was over. The textured canvas builds an authentic depiction of pure emotion. There is little depth in the image, as demonstrated by the lack of shadow in the background. This simple setting allows the viewer to focus on the subjects of the painting alone. It also emphasizes the scarce resources available to the poor family. Living in a prison, they possess the clothes on their backs and likely little else. Light is most prominently directed on both the mother’s and her child’s faces, drawing attention to their expressions. Overcome with

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emotion, the mother’s eyes are closed, rendering her oblivious to the viewer. In contrast, the child’s eyes are open yet directed downwards, indicating sadness and suffering. The mother’s gaunt appearance and her child’s frown hint at hunger. Neither person addresses the viewer, as if they are the only two people in the world.

The mother’s metaphorical blindness to her environment is especially notable given her quality of life in the Saint-Lazare Prison. Run by the Church, it started as a leprosarium in the sixteenth-century and was converted to confine women in the early nineteenth-century. Notorious in Paris for being “‘la maison maudite’ (cursed house),” life in the prison hospital was harsh, dirty, and dark. Saint-Lazare was known as the place to send social outcasts, dissidents, and criminals. The feeling of exclusion that dominated society’s relationship with the prison and the incarcerated is reflected in the lack of eye contact with the viewer. The pair excludes the viewer from their intimate moment by directing their gazes elsewhere. Furthermore, the mother’s headscarf indicates that she was a prostitute infected with venereal disease. At the time, it was standard practice for sick prostitutes to be arrested, sent to Saint-Lazare, and forced to wear a white headscarf to alert others to infection. It is even possible that the mother’s closed eyes reveal that she has syphilis, a venereal disease that, when left untreated, can cause blindness. This physical impairment would only augment their suffering. Regardless of whether she is literally blind, the mother’s symbolic blindness alludes to the exclusionary response to social outcasts in early twentieth-century French society.

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7 Robinson and Picasso, 55.
8 Robinson and Picasso, 56.
Picasso’s use of Christian iconography in *Mother and Child* further enriches Picasso’s depiction of a sex worker. The image of a child likely born out of wedlock to an infected and imprisoned prostitute does not typically evoke purity and grace. However, by referencing the traditional, sacred image of the Virgin Mary and her Baby Jesus, Picasso’s work elevates them. Due to the implicit comparison between the two women, the viewer is forced to question the function of religion in early twentieth-century society. Does this mother’s profession make her any less capable of caring for her child or any less worthy of assistance in doing so? *Mother and Child* suggests that the two are wrongly cast aside and ignored by society and the Church.

Given his own Catholic roots, Picasso was certainly aware of the traditional iconography and deliberately reinvented it. Growing up in Spain, where Catholicism is a defining part of the culture, the young painter was surrounded by the religion’s values and teachings; he was baptized and raised in the faith. As a child, he even prayed that his sister would be cured of her terminal illness. Two of his earliest works, *Crucifixion* (1896) and *First Communion* (1896), both held at the Museu Picasso, attest to his exploration of religious themes. Beyond simply re-creating Christian iconography, Picasso challenged tradition. For example, when reflecting on a commission he received from a group of nuns to copy an altarpiece by the revered Spanish painter Murillo for their convent, Picasso revealed, “the idea bored me, so I copied them up to a point, then

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9 Picasso and Glozer, *Picasso*, 16.  
11 Dillenberger and Handley, ix.  
12 Dillenberger and Handley.
rearranged things according to my own ideas.”

Picasso’s works indicate the value he placed on artistic experimentation instead of explicit imitation.

Picasso is known to have visited the Louvre while living between Paris and Barcelona during the Blue Period. There, he must have seen Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Virgin and Child with St Anne* (ca. 1510), one of the most famous paintings in the collection. [Fig. 2] In this scene, Mary sits on her mother’s lap while reaching for the baby Jesus, who is playing with a lamb. At first, it would seem da Vinci’s interpretation of the Mother and Child contrasts entirely with Picasso’s. *The Virgin and Child with St Anne* is composed with idealized precision; the subjects are placed at the center of the painting, with St Anne’s head forming the top of an implied triangle. Soft, delicate brushstrokes diffuse light within the mountainous landscape, casting a heavenly glow across the holy family. However, both artists emphasize the essence of maternal love. Picasso’s secular *Mother and Child* quietly echoes da Vinci’s subjects through Mary’s gentle smile and loving, downcast gaze toward her child. Her traditional blue shawl also connects to Picasso’s sole use of the color in his portrait. Perhaps then, Picasso was inspired by this iconic Old Master painting on view in Paris, and its image of divine, maternal love.

Picasso’s *Mother and Child*, a realistic portrait of hardship, evokes conflicting feelings of depression and appreciation for the beauty in a mother’s unconditional love. The relationship depicted in *Mother and Child* is pure, even if the subjects themselves—at least in the eyes of early twentieth-century French society—are not. In reflecting on

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14 Picasso and Cowling, 30.
Picasso’s view of the relationship between art and life, his close friend and secretary Jaime Sabartés stated that the painter believed that “art emanates from sadness and pain… that sadness lends itself to meditation, and that grief is at the depths of life.”\(^\text{15}\)

Picasso views suffering as a central, uniting part of the human condition, and that art, and thus beauty, can come from it.

\(^{15}\) Robinson and Picasso, *Picasso and the Mysteries of Life*, 55.
Fig. 1, Pablo Picasso, Mother and Child (1901), Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge
Fig. 2, Leonardo da Vinci, The Virgin and Child with St Anne, (1510), Musee du Louvre