Motherhood: Duty or Burden?

The following texts, *Finn* and *The Custom of the Country*, by the authors, John Clinch and Edith Wharton, both pose the idea of motherhood and the obligations that come along with such a title. The definition of a mother varies from person to person, and yet, we all assume that love is the predominate characteristic of being a female caregiver and provider. Both Clinch and Wharton explore the mystery of motherhood and express their views on the topic in drastic, contradicting ways. Whereas Jon Clinch portrays Mary as a caring, attentive mother who is aware of her maternal duties to her son, Huck, Wharton illustrates a harsh contrast through the main female character, Undine and the relationship with her son Paul. Although it may be bold to assume Mary is a good mother at all, being as she raised Huck in somewhat a rugged environment, it is safe to assume that the care she provides her son goes way beyond that of Undine.

In Jon Clinch’s book, *Finn*, Mary is the core woman in Huck’s life that supports and raises him. In relation to Mary and her warm nature of being a nurturing mother to Huck, one can make the correlation to biblical figures of the same name in the Bible, such as Jesus’ mother.
Mary, and also Mary Magdalene. The Virgin Mary gave birth, raised, and nurtured Jesus, showering him with unconditional love. She was his life supporter until he was old enough to become independent from his mother. This is representational in respect to Mary in Finn, being as she gave Huck shelter, protection, and love of her own kind. This is also true to the other Mary figure in the Bible, Mary Magdalene. Even though Magdalene was not Jesus’ birthmother, her faithful, selfless actions of accompanying Jesus throughout his travels all the way until his death, could also be seen as that of a mother. In this aspect, Clinch allows the reader to make the connection between biblical figures and Huck’s mother, in which Mary demonstrates her love and kindness towards Huck throughout Finn, just as the Marys in the bible showed their love and support throughout the life of Jesus.

Undine, on the other hand, has a rather twisted relationship with her son Paul. In fact, she shows little sign of any kind of love or affection towards her son throughout the novel, The Custom of the Country. Her name alone offers a meaning of the word wave. Going off of this, one can infer that a wave is something powerful, unstoppable and sometimes destructive, reflecting Undine’s personality and her relationship with Paul. Like the wave, Undine mindlessly sweeps all those out of her way, pushing on in her own direction, only for personal gain; ultimately leaving Paul a life vacant of a motherly figure. (Enotes)

To further explore the different themes of motherhood between these texts, one must take a deeper look into each book individually. In a review of Finn, Jeniffer Palladino argues, “Finn is ultimately a dynamic exploration of paternity” (Random House). This may have some truth to it, as Finn plays an important role in influencing Huck, although, Palladino undermines...
the importance of motherhood Mary plays. She clearly overlooks the fact that Mary is Huck’s sole provider and caretaker, therefore, making Finn a novel based on the influence of maternity as well as paternity. A further look into this matter will prove the invalidity of Palladnno’s argument.

While Huck’s father, referred to only as Finn, serves time at Alton Penitentiary due to his irresponsible drinking habits, Mary is left to fend for both herself and Huck, which she does by washing and laundering other men’s clothes (Clinch, 162). When Finn confronts Mary about her work she responds, “My work has been taking care of that boy” (Clinch, 172). This only enrages Finn, who accuses her of not being able to take care of Huck because of her work she replies, “And I can’t feed him if I don’t” (Clinch, 173.) This goes to show that Mary makes every effort she can to take care of her son, even if she has to sacrifice her time with him to be able to provide human necessities for him. This is an example of a mother who knows her duties, and does what she has to do for Huck.

Yet another instance of Mary’s selfless act of love towards her son is when she feels it is her duty to take Huck with her and find a new life without Finn. She does not feel right leaving Huck in the hands of a father who can hardly take care of himself, let alone a child, so she takes it upon herself to look after Huck and move in with Widow Douglas in order to sustain her life with Huck. Here it is prominent that Finn, Mary, and the boy are starving when the author gives us these details: “The woman is hungry and the boy is hungry and Finn is hungry too, but he of them all does not care much” (Clinch 195). This passage also gives way to that of another where Mary thinks to herself, “I will not be starved to death in my own house” (Clinch, 196). Mary has
to take on the role of Huck’s sole provider (which usually is the duty of the father), and also present to him love and care. She does this selflessly by finding another life with the Widow, where she can give Huck the basic human needs that he had been denied in the past.

Along with this, Mary, like any good mother, wants her mulatto son to grow up living a life as that of white people. She wishes her son be well educated and not have to work as a slave his own life. While laboring in the Widow’s yard, Mary says to Huck, “This doesn’t have to be your fate. You can make something of yourself. I won’t have you grow up a slave” (Clinch, 137 & 138). Here, Mary orders that Huck attend school, even though both she and Huck are well aware that Finn is highly against conforming to the societal ways of education. According to Bush, in his article about black mothers, his research suggests that Mary falls into the category of black mothers trying to fill a maternal gap. Bush states:

Black mothers are subjected to the controlling image of the Super/Essence woman that brings the added characteristic and responsibility of being highly educated and professional. Nevertheless, they can be debilitating to black mothers who strive to mirror those unrealistic standards. However, far too many are left wounded by the reality of oppressive circumstances that confront women, especially black women (Black Mothers/ Black Sons).
Mary strives to fill this “Super/Essence” by sending Huck to school. She does this knowing it is best for her son; he will have a good chance in life if he gains an education. Mary’s background of a black woman inhibited her of ever obtaining an education and it is because of this she wants her child to have what she was denied her whole life. Once again, Bush’s argument could be validated by Mary trying to “mirror image” her motherhood by what she believes society deems appropriate, i.e. having responsibilities to her child and giving him the education she never had. Also, Mary ends up getting “wounded” as Bush says, because after a while, she is worn down trying to raise Huck the best she can, only to have him taken from her by Finn.

While Mary’s main duty to Huck was providing him with food, shelter and education, the ultimate act of a self-sacrificing mother is shown when she gives up her identity as Huck’s real mother. Even though she tried to put up a fight against Finn’s spiteful lie, Mary knew that by going along with the lie of not being Huck’s biological mother. She had rid her son of a discriminating past, and in essence, had set him free from the label of being half Negro. By doing this, she released him of a future that may not have been so kind to him if Huck grew up with people knowing he was a mulatto.

Turning away from Mary’s selfless love and devotion to Huck, we now focus on the lack of motherly attachment with Undine and her son Paul in Custom of the Country. One of Undine’s most obvious instances of neglect towards Paul is when she forgets his birthday party. When Paul’s father, Ralph asks Mrs. Fairford about the status of Undine and Paul’s birthday celebration, she simply replies, “Apparently Undine forgot. She never went home for him” (Wharton, 129). It is implied that Undine is so caught up in her own business that she forgets
her own son’s birthday party. She is concerned only with herself, and does not care anything about Paul. Ralph proceeds to tell Undine that Paul has been crying all night, and that his family is disappointed by her actions. In response to her husband, Undine selfishly turns the argument around by making the scene all about herself when she says, “Everything always happens to put me in the wrong with your family” (Wharton, 134). Undine is pushing aside the real matter of the debate (Paul) and making it all about her, which is reoccurring theme in Wharton’s book.

Later in the novel, Undine talks with her parents about wanting to go to Europe, in which she offers them the argument: “I’ve never been strong since the baby was born, and I need a change” (Wharton 144). Here Undine is trying to rid herself of the responsibility of being a mother. She thinks that by convincing her parents she is unfit to be a mother and needs an escape from her son, they will allow her the freedom she is asking for. Whereas Undine sheds her responsibility of Paul, Mary faithfully keeps to her obligation of taking care of Huck.

To go along with the previous passage, Undine talks about going to Europe and never coming back to her life with Ralph and her son. She makes the comment, “It might mean that I could get free-begin all over again... (Wharton, 147). This is yet another instance of Undine trying to dismiss her duty to her family and doing whatever she wants. She has no regards for her husband or for Paul. Her last thoughts are of having to take care of someone other than herself. This is completely the opposite of what we see in Mary’s character.

In another part of the text, Undine uses her son and fuses him with her own looks to create an appealing motherly image to Moffatt, a man she is trying to woo:

His small black eyes twinkled with approval as they rested on her,
and Undine reflected that, with Paul's arm around her neck, and
his little flushed face against her own, she must present a not
unpleasing image of young motherhood. (Wharton, 162)

Along with this, is another passage describing the image of Paul and his mother:

Little Paul, at that stage of his career, had a peculiar grace of wide-
Gazing deep lashed eyes and arched cherubic lips, and Undine saw
that Moffatt was not insensible to the picture she and her son
composed. (Wharton, 162)

Both these quotes display the prime illustration of how Undine uses her son to bring the
spotlight to herself. Her selfishness is illuminated and the thought of Paul is merely of that of an
object, instead of her son; a person. This is something Mary never would have done; Mary took
what little limelight there was and turned it around and gave it to Huck. She never once took
the attention off her son, which is something Undine never does in Custom of the Country.

Undine's lack of parenting is exemplified by never having to bear the burden of
spending time or being around Paul. In one of the scenes, Paul is handed over to Moffatt for a
moment to relieve Undine of his weight. Wharton shows Undine's liberation by stating,
"Undine was glad to be relieved of her burden, for she was unused to the child's weight, and
disliked to feel that her skirt was dragging on the pavement" (163). Not only does Undine view
her own child as a burden and easily gives him up to the arms of someone Paul is unfamiliar
with, but she also her vanity deters her ability to raise Paul; her appearance and clothing clearly takes precedence over Paul. A mother with any kind of morals would never give her kid up to a stranger, even if it was temporary, let alone push her child unto someone merely for the sake of their clothing. This highlights the major difference between Mary and Undine. Mary never put anything before Huck, but it seems as though Undine’s priorities do not include her son.

After further reading *Custom of the Country*, Undine once again shows her selfishness when talking about her future to Van Degen. She states, “I’ve got to look out for my future” (Wharton, 182). This is a major emphasis throughout the book that reveals what Undine is truly after: her own future and life. She refuses to concern herself with the matters of other people, including Paul. Mary, on the other hand, goes out of her way to take care of her son, as mentioned previously.

Wharton also exposes another of Undine’s motherly weakness through the perspective of Paul’s father, Ralph. He is hit by the sudden epiphany that Undine really does not care anything for him, or the boy. He alludes to this by her lack of interest in her letters: “On the last page she hoped Paul was well and sent him a kiss; but she never made a suggestion concerning his care or asked a question about his pursuits” (188). Ralph comes to the realization: “He and the boy were no longer a part of her life” (Wharton, 190). This statement is true throughout the book, but this is the apex of Undine’s emotional and physical desertion of her son, where all the characters become aware of Paul’s lack of a maternal figure.

At this point, Paul has endured emotional abuse and neglect from his mother, but his reaction is not brought to the reader’s attention until the end of the novel when he bursts into
tears in front of his step-father, Moffatt. Moffatt asks Paul: “Is it because your mother hadn’t time for you? Well she’s like that, you know, and you and I have got to lump it” (Wharton, 361). Moffatt easily dismisses Undine and her disposition by simply stating that that’s the way things are with her. There is no swaying or changing Undine; she is stuck in her ways and she will forever be trapped in her self-revolving, pathetic world. She was always a poor mother to Paul and never showed him the proper attention or gave him the time of day; it was always all about her, and the end of the novel leaves the reader with the feeling that things with Paul and her will remain static and unhealthy. All of Undine’s actions sum up to the epitome of a bad mother, or one that does not care to rear their own child. Undine does nothing for her son, and in the end, he is her and left alone, bearing the pain his own mother brought upon him.

Referring back to Bush’s argument about the female Super/Essence, it is clear that Undine never strived to become the best mother she could be to Paul. Whereas Mary fit into this realm of Super/Essence, Undine’s character is vividly contrasted by Mary’s effort of motherhood.

Why does Undine act so differently than Mary in terms of mothering? The author of Mothers Need Time-Outs Too: It’s Good to be a Little Selfish offers a compelling argument to why some mothers neglect their duties as a caretaker: “Stay-at-home mothers, on the other hand, feel they need to justify their existence, because it seems like they’re not accomplishing much on a day-to-day basis” (Ch. 1). Undine could be constituted as a stay at home mother and due to this, she feels bored with her life, always looking for something more to please her and fill the void in her relationship with Paul. Undine’s character lacks motherly obligation due to her own selfishness to find her own happiness, thus fitting into the authors’ statement.
In conclusion, one can easily see the disparity of motherhood between Finn and Custom of the Country is rather obvious and exemplified throughout both texts. Whereas Mary is an example of a mother most women strive to become by giving Huck support, love, care, and a brighter future, Undine sharply contrasts this image by becoming selfish, and self-indulgent; pushing aside her responsibilities to Paul. Whereas Undine views motherhood as a burden, Mary does everything she can for Huck, therefore, making it her motherly duty to watch after her son. Clinch and Wharton pose their views on motherhood in drastically different ways, giving each text its own freedom and morals.

Good job!

To be super-organized here, you might want to write alternate paragraphs: one on Mary, then one on Undine. This will make your comparison/contrast even more effective.
Bibliography


"What does Undine's Name mean?" Enotes. 12/5 <www.enotes.com/custom-country>.