

MINDREADING

# Trauma, bereavement and the creative process: Arshile Gorky's *The Artist and His Mother*

Alexandra Pitman

**Alexandra Pitman** is a research fellow in the University College London Mental Health Sciences Unit and a higher trainee in general adult psychiatry. She is funded by the Medical Research Council to investigate the contribution of suicide bereavement as a risk factor for suicide, and to investigate the help-seeking preferences of young adults when suicidal.

**Correspondence** Dr Alexandra Pitman, UCL Mental Health Sciences Unit, Charles Bell House, 67–73 Riding House Street, London W1W 7EJ, UK. Email: a.pitman@ucl.ac.uk

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Figures 1 and 2 fall outwith this license.

## SUMMARY

The artist Arshile Gorky played a central role in the development of Abstract Expressionism during the 1940s. Born in Armenia, his early figurative works recall a childhood of persecution by Ottoman Turks, a period during which he suffered a number of significant losses. The painting *The Artist and His Mother* (c. 1926–1936) is based on a photograph showing the 7-year-old Gorky with his mother, 7 years before she starved to death during the Armenian Genocide. This article explores the early experiences that haunt this painting and the difficulties Gorky struggled with during his adult life as an immigrant to the USA – factors that contribute to an understanding of his suicide in 1948.

## DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None.

Two years before the outbreak of the First World War, a 10-year-old boy and his 32-year-old mother visited a photographic studio in the city of Van, Turkish Armenia. Around them the Armenian Genocide was escalating but their wish was to sit for a formal studio portrait. The photograph was to be sent to the boy's father, who had left 4 years previously seeking asylum in America. In the surviving 1912 black-and-white image (Fig. 1) the woman wears a long floral dress and neat headscarf. Her son stands stiffly beside her in his formal coat, usually reserved for church. Whatever she wished to communicate to her absent husband, she received no response. Seven years later she died of starvation while fleeing Turkish persecution and was buried in a mass grave. Her death, and the hopelessness of his situation, prompted her teenage son to escape to the USA. There, in about 1920, he was reunited with his father and reclaimed this photograph, later using it for a work of great personal significance: *The Artist and His Mother*.

Despite creating a new life for himself in the USA, Arshile Gorky remained haunted by

these traumatic early experiences. Afflicted by depression, financial worries, cancer and paralysis of his painting arm, he died by suicide in 1948. This article describes how Gorky used his early experiences in Armenia in his art, attempting to repair these losses by recreating his world.

## *The Artist and His Mother*

*The Artist and His Mother* is a profoundly melancholic image. The couple pose stiffly, perhaps conflicted by hope that the photograph will elicit the father's financial support and pride in seeking to present themselves in their best clothing. Their expressions betray the helplessness of their situation and the horrors they have seen befall their relatives. One of the two painted versions of this work creates a separation of the



**FIG 1** Gorky and his mother, Van city, Turkish Armenia, 1912. Unknown photographer. Photo courtesy of Dr Bruce Berberian.

figures (Fig. 2), whereas in the other their arms touch, faithful to the original photograph. The great sadness of this masterpiece lies not only in the horrifying social context it provides to the Armenian Genocide, but also its depiction of a lost and idealised mother. From piecing together Gorky's history we understand why this painting is a great work of art: in it he had embodied deep experiences of his own. As the psychoanalyst Hanna Segal explains, 'All artists aim at immortality [...] And of all human activities art comes nearest to achieving immortality' (Segal 1952). Through this framework we understand that for Gorky the act of painting this image represents his attempts to recreate a once loved and once whole object.

For over 10 years, Gorky extensively reworked the two versions of this image; a process regarded as an important means of resolving the destruction of his old world (Theriault 2009). Over the course of many charcoal, graphite and ink studies, Gorky refined the identity he wished to construct for himself and for his lost mother, repeatedly sandpapering and repainting her face to a porcelain finish (Anfam 1990). Her sorrowful serenity commemorates a woman who died amidst the family's forced displacement, and serves as an accusation of an absent father who took so little care to keep them in mind. As Gorky's wife commented years later after his death:

'He often said that, if a human being managed to emerge from such a period, it could not be as a whole man and that there was no recovery from the blows and wounds of such a struggle to survive' (Taylor 2009a).

The story told by this image adds vital personal history for a man who was to suffer a series of great hardships over a life that ended at 46.

## Biography

Arshile Gorky was born Vosdanig Adoian, probably in 1902, although no birth records survive. His family lived in the village of Khorkum, near Van, in an Armenian province near the border of Ottoman Turkey. As minority Armenians, the family lived under the threat of continued religious persecution by the Turks. His father had managed to escape conscription, a certain death sentence, by emigrating to the USA in 1908, where he joined his firstborn son. Gorky's mother, Sushranig, struggled in his absence, not least due to scant financial support. By 1915 persecution of the Armenians had intensified and the Turks commenced the Siege of Van. Alongside 250 000 others, the family fled on an 8-day march to Russian Armenia, witnessing many of their number die. Weakened over a harsh winter by

malnutrition and inadequate housing, Sushranig died in 1919 at the age of 39 and was buried in a mass grave. She joined an estimated 1 500 000 Armenians who died in massacres and forced deportations at the hands of Ottoman soldiers over the years of the Armenian Genocide.

The Armenian diaspora saw escaped communities resettling in Russia, the USA, the Middle East and Europe. In 1920 the 19-year-old Gorky and his sister Vartoosh sought exile in America. They rejoined their sisters, now living in a Massachusetts Armenian community, and their father and half-brother, who farmed in Rhode Island. Gorky's relationship with his father foundered after 11 years of separation. Resentment festered over his father's long absence, his failure to provide for the family and to protect their mother from her dreadful fate. It was around this time that Gorky found stashed in his father's drawer the photograph sent over by his mother in 1912. He borrowed it, never to return it. A final rupture with his father in his early 20s reinforced



**FIG 2** Arshile Gorky. *The Artist and His Mother* (c.1926–1936). Oil on canvas. 60 x 50¼ inches (152.4 x 127.6 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Julien Levy for Maro and Natasha Gorky in memory of their father, 50.17. Photograph by Sheldon C. Collins, courtesy of the Whitney Museum of Art, New York. © 2013 The Arshile Gorky Foundation/DACS, London. The other more ghostly version of this painting is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. The other, more ghostly, version of this painting is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. The two can be compared on the Arshile Gorky Foundation website at [arshilegorkyfoundation.org/image-gallery](http://arshilegorkyfoundation.org/image-gallery). Two ink studies, held in a private collection, can also be seen on the Foundation's website, at [arshilegorkyfoundation.org/catalogue/collection/private-collection/ML666](http://arshilegorkyfoundation.org/catalogue/collection/private-collection/ML666).

a decision to carve out his own identity, distinct from that of the immigrant labourers around him.

Gorky immersed himself in the cultural riches of recent European painting, learning by imitation and using books, museum visits and brief enrolments in art school to apprentice himself to his chosen masters – Cézanne, Picasso and Miró (Taylor 2009b). So strong was their influence on his work that many early paintings were dismissed as pastiche. However, this period was critical for Gorky in finding his own voice among new and alien circumstances. The insecurity of his identity was manifested in the lies he maintained up until his death. Changing his name in 1924 to Arshile Gorky involved a pretence at being nephew to the exiled Soviet poet Maxim Gorky (Spender 2011). Hiding away his experiences of holocaust survival, he also invented a new history for himself: an elite education and Parisian artistic training. Only posthumously did his wife find out that he had lived through genocide, at the same time discovering his real name.

As Gorky's style evolved from the figurative to the abstract, nostalgia for his heritage broke through these European borrowings. He established his place alongside contemporaries such as de Kooning, Guston, Pollock and Rothko – all central characters in the development of Abstract Expressionism (Anfam 1990). Like de Kooning and Rothko, immigrant heritage and outsider status influenced his work. Like Guston and Rothko, he suffered depression; and, as with Pollock and Rothko, he would suffer a violent death.

Gorky's connections to a group of Surrealists, including the Chilean-born artist Roberto Matta and the French writer André Breton, established him at the hub of New York's intellectual life. By 1941 he had achieved artistic recognition with his first solo exhibition. However, the 1930s and 1940s were also troubled by economic insecurity, stormy relationships and depressive episodes. Amidst this he found great happiness with his second wife, the American Agnes Magruder, whom he called Mougouch; an Armenian term of endearment. Their marriage marked a point at which no further work was to be done on the two versions of *The Artist and His Mother*. A great burden of guilt appeared to have been sublimated.

Limited finances confined the family's living space to Gorky's studio and Mougouch found it hard to keep their two young daughters from disturbing him. Relying on the kindness of friends and family, they were able to spend periods in rural Virginia and Connecticut. There, Gorky's creativity was inspired, melding memories of the

Armenian countryside into abstract American landscapes. Just as his financial prospects appeared to be lifting, the mid-1940s marked the start of a series of devastating events. There was the humiliation of a 1945 gallery opening, where delayed invitations meant that Mougouch and Gorky's dealer, Julien Levy, constituted almost the only guests. In 1946 a fire destroyed over 20 recent paintings in his Connecticut studio. The same year, Gorky underwent surgery for rectal cancer and was left with a colostomy bag. In an effort to conceal the indignities he starved himself, bandaging his body tightly to control the noises. Depression, which had affected him before his marriage, returned in 1947 and he started to speak of suicide.

By 1948 family life was significantly strained, with his wife and daughters living under the cloud of his black moods, chronic pain and heavy drinking (Spender 2011). On three occasions Mougouch saw him set off for the woods with a rope, intent on hanging himself, and was forced to send their daughters to intercept him (Spender 2011). At this time Gorky was severely injured in a car crash. His broken neck was set in a brace, paralysing his painting arm and deepening his depression. The children were terrified at the outbursts of violence they witnessed against their mother, who asked Gorky's doctor for help and was advised to seek safety at her mother's house (Spender 2011). Alone at their home, and determined to kill himself to free the family, Gorky ended his life on 21 July 1948.

### Relevance to psychiatry

Contemporary psychiatrists may find this work interesting because the figures portrayed in *The Artist and His Mother* remind us of the enduring impact of childhood trauma. For Gorky this meant that despite his attempts at reparation through art, his early experiences, long-term depressive illness and the series of tragedies he suffered in adulthood eventually proved too much for him to sublimate. More generally, the figures communicate the individual impact of great trauma to a degree that could rarely be tolerated when taking a full personal history. The young boy and his mother remind us that a trauma history represents not merely a sequence of events, but a human narrative in which relationships are ruptured, new fears are engendered, and great personal disappointments undermine the human capacity to withstand psychological assault. In the clinical setting, any patient who describes their experiences of loss or abuse battles pride, disgust, sorrow and disdain in telling their story. However dispassionately

this account is related, or indeed recorded, being reminded of Gorky's painting allows the more fine-grained interpretation warranted. *The Artist and His Mother* contributes the human detail that is often lacking, and that which Gorky was never able to speak of in adulthood.

### Acknowledgements

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