



## Global Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation

Hosted Online from Berlin, Germany

Date: 2nd April, 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

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### THE PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE IDENTITY IN ANNIE ERNAUX'S "UNE FEMME" (1987)

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#### Annotation:

This thesis examines the portrayal of female identity in Anni Erno (Annie Ernaux)'s autobiographical narrative *Une femme* ("A Woman's Story," 1987). Drawing on Bourdieusian sociology and feminist literary criticism, the study analyses how Ernaux constructs womanhood through the prism of the mother-daughter relationship, class mobility, and collective memory. The author argues that *Une femme* transcends conventional autobiography by transforming one working-class woman's life into a transpersonal document of gendered social existence in twentieth-century France, and that Ernaux's *écriture plate* (flat writing) is a politically motivated refusal to aestheticise the lives of dominated women.

**Keywords:** female identity, Annie Ernaux, *Une femme*, mother-daughter relationship, *écriture plate*, autosociobiography, class and gender.

#### Аннотация:

В данной статье исследуется изображение женской идентичности в автобиографическом произведении Анни Эрно (Annie Ernaux) «Одна женщина» / *Une femme* (1987). Работа анализирует, как Эрно конструирует образ женственности через призму отношений матери и дочери, классовой мобильности и коллективной памяти. Опираясь на социологию Пьера Бурдьё



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и феминистскую критику, автор утверждает, что *Une femme* превращает опыт одной женщины из рабочего класса в трансперсональный документ гендерного существования во Франции XX века.

**Ключевые слова:** женская идентичность, Анни Эрно, «Одна женщина», отношения матери и дочери, плоское письмо, автосоциобиография, класс и гендер.

Anni Erno (Annie Ernaux, born 1940) occupies a singular position in contemporary French literature. Her autobiographical works have redefined the boundaries between literature, sociology, and history by turning private experience into a lens for examining collective social phenomena. “*Une femme*” (“A Woman’s Story,” 1987), written in the weeks following the death of her mother in April 1986, reconstructs the life of an ordinary working-class Normandy woman whose existence was shaped by the intersecting forces of class, gender, and historical circumstance.<sup>[1]</sup>

Ernaux’s method – which she termed *autosociobiographie* – systematically combines the personal, the sociological, and the historical. As Siobhán Makilvenni (Siobhán McIlvanney) demonstrated, the book’s metacommentary technique reveals that personal memory is always already social, and that female identity cannot be separated from class position.<sup>[2]</sup> The present thesis argues that “*Une femme*” constitutes an act of feminist recuperation: by refusing to sentimentalise her mother’s life, Ernaux transforms a private elegy into a document of collective female existence.

The central achievement of “*Une femme*” is the construction of the mother not merely as an individual character but as a social type. The very title signals this intention: Ernaux chose “*Une femme*” (“A Woman”) rather than “*Ma mere*” (“My



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Mother”), using the indefinite article to indicate that this woman’s story embodies something universal about female experience in twentieth-century France.

Ernaux captures this paradox with characteristic precision: “Fière d’être ouvrière mais pas au point de le rester toujours, rêvant de la seule aventure à sa mesure : prendre un commerce d’alimentation” (“Proud to be a worker but not so proud as to remain one forever, dreaming of the only adventure within her reach: running a grocery store”).<sup>[3]</sup> The mother’s pride was real, but her aspirations were gendered: the “adventure within her reach” was not political activism but petit-bourgeois shopkeeping – a form of female agency socially legible within her milieu. Lin Tomas (Lyn Thomas) argued that this is Ernaux’s central insight: the mother’s identity as a woman cannot be understood through gender alone but requires attention to the class dynamics that both motivated and constrained her choices.<sup>[4]</sup> In my view, this inseparability of class and gender is what makes “Une femme” so enduringly relevant. Ernaux refuses the abstraction of gender identity from its material conditions: the mother is not “woman” in some philosophical sense but a specific woman whose femininity was constituted through labour, sacrifice, and the dream of upward mobility for her child.

Ernaux’s “écriture plate” (flat writing) – a deliberately stripped-down prose style that renounces literary ornamentation and metaphor – is not merely a stylistic preference but a political act. As Zhan P’yero (Jean Pierrot) established, the “flatness” is a carefully constructed second-degree writing: the result of sustained effort, not negligence.<sup>[5]</sup> Ernaux herself defined the style in *La Place* (1983): “L’écriture plate me vient naturellement, celle-là même que j’utilisais en écrivant autrefois à mes parents” (“Flat writing comes to me naturally, the same kind I used when writing to my parents”).<sup>[6]</sup>

By writing about her mother in the same plain language she would have used to address her, Ernaux refuses what she calls the “signs of elitist cultural complicity”



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of bourgeois literary prose. To aestheticise her mother's life would be to betray the mother's linguistic world. The flat style thus functions as a form of fidelity. From a feminist perspective, this approach also resists the dominant French tradition of "écriture féminine" associated with Элен Сиксу (Hélène Cixous), which celebrates linguistic excess and jouissance. As Zhizel' Sapir (Gisèle Sapir) observed, Ernaux operates as an "ethnographer of symbolic violence" who reveals domination's mechanisms without using theoretical jargon.<sup>[7]</sup> I would argue that this makes Ernaux's feminism more politically effective than "écriture féminine", precisely because it remains accessible to the social class whose experience it describes.

The relationship between mother and daughter in "Une femme" is not presented sentimentally; it is analysed as a site where class contradictions are lived bodily. Betani Ladimer (Bethany Ladimer) showed that in Ernaux's work, class and gender function as inseparable "codes" through which female subjectivity is constructed.<sup>[8]</sup> The mother's ambition for her daughter's education is simultaneously an act of love and an act of self-erasure: each academic achievement widens the cultural distance between them. Ernaux captures this tension: "J'étais certaine de son amour et de cette injustice : elle servait des pommes de terre et du lait du matin au soir pour que je sois assise dans un amphî à écouter parler de Platon" ("I was certain of her love and of this injustice: she served potatoes and milk from morning to night so that I could sit in a lecture hall listening to people talk about Plato").<sup>[9]</sup>

This passage reveals the gendered economy of cultural capital: the mother's physical labour – repetitive, bodily, feminine – is exchanged for the daughter's intellectual advancement in a masculine intellectual world. The text's most powerful articulation of the mother-daughter bond comes in its closing passage: "C'est elle, et ses paroles, ses mains, ses gestes, sa manière de rire et de marcher, qui unissaient la femme que je suis à l'enfant que j'ai été. J'ai perdu le dernier lien



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avec le monde dont je suis issue” (“It was her voice, together with her words, her hands, and her way of moving and laughing, which linked the woman I am to the child I once was. The last bond between me and the world I come from has been severed”).<sup>[10]</sup>

The mother’s body – her voice, hands, and gestures – served as the physical link between the daughter’s bourgeois present and her working-class past. The mother’s death therefore represents not only a personal loss but a social rupture: the extinction of embodied class memory. Margeri Vibe Skagen (Margery Vibe Skagen) interpreted this as a form of “temporal displacement” in which the death of the mother forces the daughter to confront the irreversibility of her class migration.<sup>[11]</sup> Furthermore, writing itself becomes a reversal of biological motherhood: “Il me semble maintenant que j’écis sur ma mère pour, à mon tour, la mettre au monde” (“I believe I am writing about my mother because it is my turn to bring her into the world”).<sup>[12]</sup> This metanarrative statement reconfigures the daughter as the mother’s creator, suggesting that literature can perform a symbolic reparation for the social invisibility imposed upon working-class women.

Annie Ernaux’s “Une femme” remains one of the most rigorous literary examinations of female identity produced in the late twentieth century. Through the figure of the mother, Ernaux demonstrates that womanhood is not an abstract philosophical category but a lived condition shaped by class, labour, and historical circumstance. Natal’i Morello (Nathalie Morello) demonstrated that “Une femme” completes what “La Place” had begun: whereas the father’s story centres social dispossession through laconic restraint, the mother’s story reveals how women’s class experience is additionally shaped by gender norms, maternal sacrifice, and the politics of sexual respectability.<sup>[13]</sup>

In my assessment, the lasting power of “Une femme” resides in Ernaux’s principled refusal to aestheticise suffering. By staying “au-dessous de la littérature” (“below



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literature”), she creates a space where the ordinary working-class woman – historically invisible in the French literary canon – can be seen and understood on her own terms. The book’s feminist significance lies not in theoretical abstraction but in the concrete demonstration that a woman’s life, however modest in social terms, contains within it the entire structure of class and gender domination that shapes modern society. As Ernaux herself declares: “Il fallait que ma mère devienne histoire, pour que je me sente moins seule et factice dans le monde dominant des mots et des idées” (“My mother had to become history so that I would feel less alone and artificial in the dominant world of words and ideas”).<sup>[14]</sup>

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