

Mother's Day

Subjects: **Cultural Studies**

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Mother's Day is an annual celebration observed in numerous countries around the world to honor and appreciate mothers, motherhood, and the influence of maternal figures in society. Typically held on the second Sunday of May in many countries, it involves cultural, familial, and often commercial practices aimed at expressing gratitude, love, and recognition of maternal roles.

Mother's Day

motherhood

maternal memory

Mothering Sunday

1. Overview

Mother's Day is a holiday celebrated annually in many countries to honor mothers, motherhood, and the maternal bonds central to families and society. Though its exact date and customs vary by nation, it is most widely observed on the second Sunday of May, particularly in the United States, Canada, Australia, and much of Europe and Asia. The holiday serves as a tribute to maternal figures and is often marked by the giving of cards, flowers, gifts, and acts of appreciation.



2. Historical Origins

2.1. Ancient Traditions

Celebrations of motherhood can be traced back to ancient civilizations. In ancient Greece, festivals were held in honor of Rhea, the mother of the gods. Similarly, Romans celebrated Hilaria, a festival honoring Cybele, a maternal goddess, during March. These ceremonies included offerings and public celebrations centered on fertility and motherhood ^[1].

2.2. Christian Influence: Mothering Sunday

The precursor to modern Mother's Day in the United Kingdom and parts of Europe was Mothering Sunday, a Christian tradition celebrated on the fourth Sunday of Lent. Originating in the 16th century, it was a day when parishioners returned to their "mother church" for special services. Over time, it evolved into a more secular occasion where children, especially those in domestic service, visited home and brought gifts to their mothers ^[2].

3. Modern Mother's Day: United States Origins

The modern celebration of Mother's Day is widely credited to Anna Jarvis, an American social activist, who established the holiday as a way to honor her late mother, Ann Reeves Jarvis. Ann had organized Mother's Day Work Clubs in the 19th century to improve sanitary conditions and reduce infant mortality in Appalachia. After her death in 1905, Anna began campaigning for an official holiday dedicated to mothers ^[3].

In 1908, Anna Jarvis held a memorial at St. Andrew's Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia, which is now home to the International Mother's Day Shrine. By 1914, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson officially proclaimed the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day, a national holiday dedicated to "the best mother in the world—your mother."

4. Commercialization and Opposition

Ironically, Anna Jarvis became one of the strongest critics of Mother's Day's commercialization. She denounced florists, greeting card companies, and retailers for turning her solemn vision into a profit-driven spectacle. She even filed lawsuits and staged protests in an attempt to reclaim the holiday's original purpose (Levine, 2003). Despite her efforts, the day continued to grow as one of the most commercially successful holidays in the U.S., generating billions annually in spending.

5. Global Observance

Though the second Sunday in May is standard in many countries, Mother's Day is celebrated on different dates and with unique customs worldwide:

- United Kingdom: Mothering Sunday, fourth Sunday in Lent.
- Mexico: Celebrated on May 10, regardless of the day of the week. It includes serenades and family gatherings.
- Thailand: Celebrated on August 12, the birthday of Queen Sirikit, the mother of the nation.
- Ethiopia: Celebrated in early fall with the Antrosht festival, marked by a multi-day feast and family reunions.
- France: Observed in late May or early June with family meals and traditional flower offerings.

These variations reflect cultural values, religious backgrounds, and national histories surrounding maternal figures.

6. Sociocultural Impact

Mother's Day has become not only a celebration of biological mothers but also a broader recognition of all women who perform maternal roles, including grandmothers, stepmothers, adoptive mothers, and even mother figures in communities and schools. It offers an opportunity for reflection on maternal labor—both emotional and physical—and its undervaluation in many societies ^[4].

Additionally, some scholars critique the holiday for reinforcing traditional gender roles. Feminist thinkers have argued that while Mother's Day exalts women in the role of caregivers, it can also obscure the need for gender equity and shared parental responsibility (Douglas & Michaels, 2004).

7. Mother's Day in Popular Culture

From television specials to poems and music, Mother's Day has had a strong presence in popular culture. Songs like Tupac Shakur's "Dear Mama" and Boyz II Men's "A Song for Mama" exemplify the emotional resonance of maternal appreciation. Greeting cards and advertising campaigns often emphasize sacrifice, unconditional love, and the uniqueness of the maternal bond.



8. Contemporary Evolution

In recent years, Mother's Day has expanded in meaning and inclusivity. Many celebrate LGBTQ+ parents, single fathers in maternal roles, and foster caregivers. The day also invites contemplation for those who have lost their mothers, struggled with infertility, or experienced maternal estrangement. Social media has amplified both expressions of celebration and dialogue around grief and maternal absence.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Mother's Day adapted to physical distancing rules, leading to virtual family gatherings, drive-by parades, and an uptick in e-commerce flower sales.

9. Economic Significance

According to the National Retail Federation (NRF), Mother's Day ranks among the highest annual consumer spending holidays in the United States. In 2023 alone, U.S. consumers were expected to spend over \$35 billion, with popular gifts including flowers, jewelry, gift cards, and meals ^[5]. This commercial dimension supports a vast industry—from floriculture to hospitality.

10. Environmental and Ethical Considerations

Critics also highlight the environmental impact of Mother's Day, particularly in terms of flower production, packaging waste, and carbon emissions from shipping. Ethical sourcing of gifts, fair-trade flower options, and sustainable cards have become topics of concern among environmentally conscious consumers.

11. Mother's Day in the Digital Age

In the digital era, Mother's Day has found a stronghold on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, where users post tributes, memories, and messages of love. Hashtags like #MothersDay, #ThanksMom, and #MotherhoodUnplugged trend globally each May. Virtual gifting, personalized e-cards, and live video calls have also redefined how the day is celebrated, especially across long distances.

12. Legacy and Continuing Relevance

Mother's Day continues to evolve as a cultural mirror reflecting society's relationship with motherhood, care work, and familial structures. It is both a day of intimate personal meaning and public celebration. As family norms diversify, Mother's Day remains an adaptable platform for appreciating caregivers of all kinds.

References

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