

**T.C.  
BAŐKENT ÜNİVERSİTESİ  
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ  
AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI ANABİLİM DALI  
TEZLİ YÜKSEK LİSANS PROGRAMI**

**Narrating Mother-Daughter Relationships:  
A Kleinian Analysis of Joyce Carol Oates's Later Novels**

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**Anne-Kız İlişisini Anlatmak:**

**Kleinci Kuram Işığında Joyce Carol Oates'un Son Dönem Romanları**

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## ABSTRACT

The mother-daughter relationship has been a recurrent theme in Joyce Carol Oates's fiction, whose career spans a period of over fifty years. Three of her recent novels—*I'll Take You There* (2002), *Missing Mom* (2005), and *Mudwoman* (2012)—attest to the writer's sustained interest in placing the stories of the protagonists within the context of their complicated psychological connections with their mothers.

Oates's novels gain added interest when read in the light of the Austrian British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's object-relations theory, which posits that an infant's early relationship with his/her mother will bear an immense influence on his/her psychological life as an adult. According to Klein, an infant goes through two main developmental phases in the first year of life: "the paranoid-schizoid position" and "the depressive position." In the former, the infant perceives the mother in a fragmentary way, as a composite of the part-objects of "the good breast" (when his/her needs are satisfied) and the "bad breast" (when s/he feels frustrated). As s/he continues to work through the polar emotions of satisfaction and aggression, love and hatred through this stage, the infant gradually enters the second phase where s/he begins to perceive the mother as a whole object and develops more sophisticated emotions such as guilt: entertaining the notion that his/her own aggression might have caused the loss of "the good breast," s/he attempts "reparation," an emotional state that can also be observed in adults who mourn for their loved ones.

While all of Oates's three recent novels are plotted around the common core of the daughters' struggles to come to terms with the loss of their mothers, this thesis argues, Oates introduces compelling variations to her representation of the mother-daughter relationship in each novel, variations that can best be understood through the insights provided by the

Kleinian theory. The thesis discusses how these variations are reflected in the narrative technique of each novel as well.

**Keywords:** Mother-Daughter Relationships, Joyce Carol Oates, Melanie Klein, Object-Relations Theory

## ÖZET

Anne-kız ilişkisi, kariyeri elli yılı aşmış olan ünlü Amerikalı yazar Joyce Carol Oates'un eserlerindeki önemli temalardan biridir. 2000'li yıllarda yayımlanan *I'll Take You There* (2002), *Missing Mom* (2005) ve *Mudwoman* (2012)<sup>1</sup> başlıklı romanlar, yazarın anne-kız ilişkisinin özellikle psikolojik yönleri üzerine yoğunlaştığını göstermektedir.

Bu üç roman, bebeklerin doğumdan sonraki ilk yıl içinde anneleriyle geliştirdikleri ilişkilerin yetişkinlik dönemine de yansıdığını savunan Avusturya kökenli İngiliz psikanalist ve kuramcı Melanie Klein'in nesne ilişkileri kuramına göre incelenebilir. Klein'a göre, bir bebek psikolojik gelişim sürecinde başlıca iki aşamadan geçer: "paranoid-şizoid konum" ve "depresif konum." İlk konumda, bebek annesini bölük pörçük algılar: bu aşamada "iyi meme" ve "düşman meme" algısı ortaya çıkar. Bebek gereksinimleri karşılandığında, örneğin karnı doyurulduğunda, "iyi meme" algısı yaratır; ancak bu gereksinimleri giderilmezse engellendiğini hisseder ve "düşman meme" algısı yaratır. Tatmin ve kızgınlık, sevgi ve nefret arasında gidip gelen bebek zamanla ikinci önemli aşama olan "depresif konum"a girmeye başlar. Bu konumda artık annesini bir bütün olarak görmeye ve "iyi meme" ve "düşman meme"nin aynı annede var olduğunu kavramaya başlayarak suçluluk hissi gibi duygular içine girer, çünkü "iyi meme"nin kendi kızgınlığı yüzünden yok olduğunu zanneder. Bebeğin suçluluk hissi onu "onarım" yapmaya ve kaybettiğini düşündüğü "iyi meme" için yas tutmaya yönlendirir.

Oates'un adı geçen üç romanının ortak özelliği, ana karakterlerinin annelerinin yokluğuyla başa çıkmaya çalışmalarıdır. Bu tez, romanların ana karakterlerinin Klein'in kuramındaki psikolojik aşamalara benzerlik gösteren içsel süreçlerden geçtiklerini savunmaktadır. Tez, Oates'un romanlarda anne-kız ilişkilerinin ne derece çapraşık olduğunu gösteren farklı öyküler yarattığını ve bu farklılıkları anlatım tekniğine de yansıttığını tartışacaktır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Anne-Kız İlişkileri, Joyce Carol Oates, Melanie Klein, Nesne İlişkileri

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To my mother and father

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## INTRODUCTION

Born in 1938, Joyce Carol Oates is one of the most prolific and versatile writers of twentieth century American Literature. Since the publication in 1963 of her first book, *By the North Gate*, she has written more than fifty novels, as well as plays, poems, essays and autobiographical works. Besides her many literary awards, Oates has also received the National Humanities Medal. Oates is also an accomplished academician: having studied English at Syracuse University, she earned a MA degree in English from the University of Wisconsin and a PhD degree in English at Rice University (Creighton xiii, xiv). At present, she is a professor of creative writing at Princeton University and continues her writing career.

In her fiction, Oates frequently creates complex female characters who encounter various sexual, psychological, and social problems. Some feminist critics disparage Oates for representing her characters as victimized women with little agency.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, other critics such as Pamela Smiley refer to her as “a feminist writer” who “has created many memorable female characters, [...] often giving voice to the silenced woman” (717). In a recent overview of Oates criticism, it is explained that many feminist critics “have defended the feminist sensibility underlying much of her fiction. They trace the changing portrayals of gender power in her late work, contending that her more recent novels focus on the power of female bonds and self-discovery” (“Joyce Carol Oates,” 268).

One specific issue Oates keeps returning to in her fiction is the mother-daughter relationships. In several novels written from the 1960s to the 1990s, as Joanne V. Creighton and Kori A. Binette observe, Oates created remarkable daughter figures who “emerge stronger and more self-directed” despite “their chaotic beginnings and traumatizing experiences” (2006: 440). Concentrating on Oates’s fiction of the 1980s, the critic Brenda O. Daly finds that there is a marked change in Oates’s treatment of daughter figures: while they

still tend to “overridealize their fathers,” they also “begin to value their maternal inheritance” and “resist incestuous alliances, psychological or actual, with their fathers” (xxiii).

Although very little critical work has yet been undertaken on the treatment of mother-daughter relationships in Oates’s fiction of the 2000s, it might be argued that Oates maintains certain characteristics of her earlier fiction but also proceeds in new directions. In *I’ll Take You There* (2002), *Missing Mom* (2005), and *Mudwoman* (2012), Oates indeed continues to create fascinating daughter characters who are much more preoccupied with their mothers than with their fathers. However, the daughters’ efforts to come to terms with their mothers’ legacy in these three novels does not unconditionally lead to “tales of female resilience, adaptation, and survival,” as Daly suggests is the case with Oates’s earlier novels (440). This is because each of the later novels resists such overarching approaches by making the daughter’s response to the legacy of her mother unique—she may accomplish genuine closure (*I’ll Take You There*), she may satisfy herself with callous adulation (*Missing Mom*), or she may face emotional disintegration (*Mudwoman*).

If the three later novels come to give more varied roles to the daughter figures than in the earlier novels, they also introduce significant changes to the portrayals of the mother figures. In earlier novels such as *Do With Me What You Will* (1973), for example, the mother presents an overwhelmingly negative portrait: “As a consequence of her mother’s manipulations, Elena [the daughter] develops the self-defensive ability to ‘go into stone,’ that is, retreat into herself to the point of feeling absolutely nothing” (Creighton and Binette 443). In *You Must Remember This* (1987), the pendulum swings the other way. The mother in this case is represented as a relatively simple character without much influence—either positive or negative—in her daughter’s life. In contrast, this thesis will argue, each of the three later Oates novels to be discussed in this thesis makes the influence of the mother felt in the

daughter's life in a much more sophisticated way, and this despite the fact that the mother is physically absent through much of each daughter's story.

In exploring how the mother's presence in the daughter's psyche is central to the thematic concerns, plot, characterization, and narrative technique of each novel, this thesis will draw upon the Austrian British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's object-relations theory. Klein defines object-relations as follows:

“My use of the term ‘object-relations’ is based on my contention that the infant has from the beginning of post-natal life a relation to the mother (although focusing primarily on her breast) which is imbued with the fundamental elements of an object-relation, *i.e.* love, hatred, phantasies, anxieties, and defences.” (1975: 49)

Klein holds that the infant's relationship with the mother not only affects his/her development as a child but also remains an important element in his/her psychological life as an adult. At this point, an overview of Klein's career and approach to child psychology will be useful in explaining how her theory can be utilized in the interpretation of Oates's later novels.

### **A. Melanie Klein and Object-Relations Theory**

Born in 1882, Melanie Klein was one of the important voices in the field of child psychoanalysis. Because her future husband's job necessitated constant travel, Klein had to give up on her plans to study medicine. She studied humanities at Vienna University for two years, but was unable to complete her degree, as marriage intervened. (H. Segal, 1980: 23). During her stay in Budapest in 1914, Klein effectively launched her self-taught career in psychiatry first by reading Freud's works, and then undergoing psychoanalysis with Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi. With the encouragement of Ferenczi, she first analyzed her own children. In 1921, Klein moved to Berlin, where she began to work with

Sigmund Freud's student and collaborator Karl Abraham on child psychoanalysis. Upon the invitation of Ernest Jones, the famous English Freudian psychoanalyst, Klein went to London and worked there until her death in 1960 (Stonebridge et al, 13). Although Klein inevitably came under the influence of her older contemporary Sigmund Freud, her practice took a different turn from that of the latter. Whereas Freud concentrated on adult patients, she worked directly with children. Today, Klein is regarded as a pioneer in child analysis thanks to the "play technique" through which she interpreted children's play in the same way as dreams are interpreted in adult analysis, something which enabled her to access children's inner conflicts and "phantasies" (J. Segal, 2004: 29).<sup>3</sup>

Her work with children led Klein to depart from the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis in important ways. Whereas Freud places the strongest emphasis on Oedipal development in which the father figure bears the strongest influence over the formation of the infant's sexuality, Klein centralizes the infant's pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother figure (Freud, 2010: 193). Moreover, the Kleinian theory also holds that the major psychological processes an infant undergoes during the pre-Oedipal stage will not be easily obscured or overshadowed by those of the Oedipal stage (Klein, 1988: 374). On the contrary, they will keep resurfacing in critical moments throughout an individual's adult life.

Besides highlighting the crucial importance of the pre-oedipal stage as exerting a life-long influence on an individual, the Kleinian theory also introduces significant variations into Freud's model of the human psyche. For Freud, the mind has three structures: the ego, the id, and the super-ego. His definition of the ego and the id reveals the contrast between the two: "The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to id, which contains the passions" (1962:15). He describes the "chief function" of the super-ego as "the limitation of satisfaction" (1955:5). While Klein concurs with the presence and function of the id and the ego in the human psyche in general, "[h]er idea of the 'id' is not so rooted in

biology as Freud's. In the case of the ego, Klein never really distinguishes between the ego and the self, and throughout her work she uses the terms interchangeably, though of course Freud often did this too" (Spillius, 32, 33). The most significant difference comes with Klein's interpretation of the superego. "According to Freud the super-ego is the 'heir' or successor of the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex represents the culmination of the child's sexual development; it marks the end of its first onset" (Heimann 132). Klein generally agrees with Freud's notion that the superego is instrumental in the "transgenerational transmission of rules and laws" onto the infant's mind (Mitchell xxxi). Significantly, however, while Freud thinks that "the superego is formed on the dissolution of the Oedipus complex," Klein posits that the infant "has phantasies of terrifying, punishing internal parents, constituting, in fact, a particularly savage superego with which the child's ego cannot cope" (H. Segal, 1980: 38). As opposed to Freud, then, Klein argues that the interaction between the ego and the superego starts at an earlier stage in an infant's life, taking on a strongly conflictual aspect.

Klein relates the origins of such psychological conflicts in early life to the infant's relationship with the mother's breast. Because s/he has as yet no capacity to see the mother as a whole, the infant initially forms a partial, fragmented image of the mother. Nor is the infant at this point able to differentiate between what is real and what is happening in his/her phantasy: that is to say, the infant begins to develop a notion of the mother that does not always correspond to reality. For the infant the mother's breast becomes a part-object, divided in the infant's phantasy into two as "the good breast" and "the bad breast." In Kleinian terminology a 'part-object' has to do with the infant's first relation "not to mother and father as whole individuals but only to parts of their bodies, such as breast or penis" (Alford, 1989: 28).

When the infant feels hungry, for example, and cannot find the breast which will feed her, s/he destroys it in her phantasy. For Klein, the ensuing emotional troubles are characteristic of the “paranoid-schizoid position,” the earliest pre-oedipal stage where the child fears that s/he will be persecuted by external elements for having caused such destruction. Because Klein, unlike Freud, posits that this early mental states can and do recur even in adulthood, she prefers the term “position” to the Freudian terms “stage” and “phase” (H.Segal,1974:ix). For Klein, in the paranoid-schizoid position the child’s conflicted emotions about the mother’s breast are at their most acute:

“From the beginning the ego introjects objects ‘good’ and ‘bad’, for both of which the mother’s breast is the prototype—for good objects when the child obtains it, for bad ones when it him. But it is because the baby projects its own aggression on to these objects that it feels them to be ‘bad’ and not only in that they frustrate its desires: the child conceives of them as actually dangerous—persecutors who it fears will devour it, scoop out the inside of its destruction by all the means which sadism can devise.” (1988: 262)

The child’s fears of persecution lead him/her to develop several defense mechanisms such as splitting and idealization: “The leading anxiety at that stage is lest these persecutors destroy both the self and the ideal object, and against this anxiety schizoid mechanisms are used, such as increasing the split between the ideal and the bad object, and excessive idealization” (H. Segal 117). One remarkable aspect of this stage is that the infant not only splits the object but also his/her own ego, as Klein holds there is “sufficient ego exists at birth” to catalyze such a defense mechanism (H. Segal, 1974:24).

As Meira Likierman points out, Klein’s “Notes on some Schizoid Mechanisms” (1946) “suggested that before the onset of the depressive position and in the earliest months

of infancy, a paranoid-schizoid position dominates the first evolutionary phase of mental life” (144). Beginning just after birth, the paranoid-schizoid position develops fully in the first three or four months, gradually giving way to what Klein calls “depressive position” during the first year of life (Klein,1975: 49-50).

“The shift from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position is a fundamental change from psychotic to sane functioning. [...] External and internal reality become differentiated. The sense of psychic reality develops—acknowledging and assuming responsibility for one’s own impulses and the state of one’s internal objects. Reality-testing can then take place, and the matching of one’s own phantasies with the perception of reality.” (H. Segal, 1980: 136, 137)

The infant’s aggressive impulses and the anxieties caused by them do not entirely disappear at this new phase, but the infant is now capable of seeing the mother as a whole and distinct entity and consequently developing more complicated emotional responses such as the “depressive feelings of guilt, loss, and pining” (H. Segal, 1980: 78). In other words, while in the paranoid-schizoid position the ego divides the object and itself into good and bad parts, in the depressive position “the ego is integrated and exposed to the conflict of contradictory impulses” (H. Segal, 1980: 127). The sense of guilt, for example, appears due to the infant’s own aggressive phantasies against the good object. Feeling remorse because of having destroyed the good object, the child engages in what Klein refers to as the activity of “reparation.” For Klein, “in our unconscious phantasy we make good the injuries which we did in phantasy, and for which we still unconsciously feel very guilty. This *making reparation* is [...] a fundamental element in love and in all human relationships” (Klein, 1988: 312, 313).

Such depressive responses are revived by every loss in an individual’s life, especially when the individual confronts the death of a loved person. According to Klein, the process of

mourning in an adult takes on a normal or an abnormal course depending upon what the individual psychologically experienced in infancy. According to Klein, “the manic-depressive and the person who fails in the work of mourning, though their defences may differ widely from each other, have this in common, that they have been unable in early childhood to establish their internal ‘good’ objects and to feel secure in their inner world” (Klein,1988: 369). Klein describes the process of normal mourning as follows:

“In normal mourning, however, the early depressive position, which had become revived through the loss of the loved object, becomes modified again, and is overcome by methods similar to those used by the ego in childhood. [...] It is by reinstating inside himself the ‘good’ parents as well as the recently lost person, and by rebuilding his inner world, which was disintegrated and in danger, that he overcomes his grief, regains security, and achieves true harmony and peace.” (1988: 369)

Extending from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position, from reparation to mourning, Klein’s theory of pre-Oedipal development provides a comprehensive model of how the infant’s early life impacts his/her life as an adult. As will be discussed in more detail below, Klein’s insights into the infant’s relationships with other individuals, and especially with the mother as the initial point of contact with the outside world, have proved to be inspirational especially in feminist literary criticism.

### **B. Kleinian Theory into Feminist Criticism**

The importance of Klein’s object-relations theory for later feminist thinking needs no overemphasis. The French feminist psychoanalyst and literary theorist Julia Kristeva hails Klein as a “genius” who saw that “the psyche does not exist and is inconceivable in the absence of a ‘self’ that she postulates along with its correlate, which is the relationship to the

‘object’” (499). Kristeva also dwells upon the differences between Freudian and Kleinian theories as follows:

“She [Klein] radically transforms the Freudian hypothesis of an original narcissism and postulates, from the very beginning of a baby’s psychic life, a ‘self’ capable of a ‘relationship with the object,’ albeit partial (to the breast), before the child becomes capable of constructing an object-relation to the ‘total object’ following the depressive position. One consideration is prior to all others for this psychoanalyst: the psyche does not exist and is inconceivable in the absence of a ‘self’ that she postulates along with its correlate, which is the relationship to the ‘object.’”(498, 499)

Kristeva’s emphasis on the interrelationship of the ‘self’ and the ‘object’ adumbrates the special relevance of Kleinian theory to feminist criticism exploring mother-daughter relationships.

Klein’s psychoanalytical approaches have been successfully adapted by feminist literary critics across various genres, including the novel, poetry, and the fairy tale. Beverley Southgate (2011), for example, analyzes Emily Brontë’s life and poems as well as her masterpiece *Wuthering Heights* under the Kleinian theory. Jahan Ramazani (1994) discusses some of Sylvia Plath’s poems with reference to Klein’s notion of mourning. Julia Segal (2004) draws parallels between Klein’s theory of the good breast/the bad breast and the mother figures in the tale of Cinderella.

### **C. Kleinian Theory and Mother-Daughter Relationships in Oates’s Later Novels**

The Kleinian object-relations theory provides compelling inroads into the psychological trials the daughter protagonists of Joyce Carol Oates’s later novels *I’ll Take You There*, *Missing Mom* and *Mudwoman* undergo upon the loss of their mothers. In *I’ll Take*

*You There*, the protagonist flits constantly between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position as a young woman, but finally manages to make reparation and achieve normal mourning. The daughter in *Missing Mom* experiences emotional states of mind which in Kleinian theory correspond to the mourning and reparation processes. *Mudwoman* presents a much grimmer picture, where the protagonist remains imprisoned within the paranoid-schizoid position.

Chapter I of the thesis will analyze *I'll Take You There*, which depicts the story of a young woman who, at the beginning of the novel, is a freshman philosophy student at Syracuse University, New York. Because she was only eighteen months old when her mother died of breast cancer, she naturally does not remember her mother well (Oates, 2002: 17-18). However, this early loss affects her well into adulthood, as it is aggravated by feelings of guilt: her relatives have always blamed her for her mother's death. Consequently, she comes to despise herself, something which is evinced especially in her dislike of her own body, in her tortuous thoughts and emotions about herself, and even in her censoring of her own name (she never reveals her real name to the readers). During her university years, she desperately tries (but fails) to make herself loved by the women she gets to know in the sorority house, and obsessively falls in love with a black university student. She begins to face up to the trauma of losing her mother only after starting a career as a writer. She is able to complete the process of mourning for her mother finally through a reconciliation with her father who, not coincidentally, dies of cancer like her mother and who, therefore, serves as a substitute for the mother. As it is stated earlier, this study also aims to analyze the narrative techniques of each novel. Each novel has different characteristic features and that is because Joyce Carol Oates uses unique narrative technique in each one of them. First novel *I'll Take You There*, is written in a more conventional style in the first person point of view. There is a chronological order

that follows the protagonist's lifestyle. The protagonist narrates the stages of her psychologically problematic relationship with her dead mother in a reliable narration.

Chapter II will examine *Missing Mom*, which bears several similarities to *I'll Take You There*. Both novels are narrated in the first person by the protagonist. In both novels, the protagonist's narration moves back and forth in time in a way that parallels her vacillating thoughts and emotions about her mother and herself. As in *I'll Take You There*, she undergoes the mourning and reparation processes. Interestingly, however, Oates creates an altogether different mother-daughter relationship in *Missing Mom*. The most obvious difference is that the protagonist, a thirty-one year-old woman called Nikki, faces the loss of the mother as an adult. The second one is that it does not take her long to complete the process of mourning. Most importantly, unlike the protagonist in *I'll Take You There*, Nikki turns out to be a self-centered daughter who manipulates her mother's memory to her own purposes. When her mother Gwen was alive, Nikki did her best to avoid what she thought was the anodyne, bourgeois lifestyle of her mother. After Gwen's death, she learns more and more about her mother's past and seems to feel closer to her, but in fact she uses—and even rescripts—her mother's sufferings in keeping with her own increasingly conformist middle-class way of life. Consequently, the novel's psychological analysis turns into a subtle critique of American middle-class mores, represented by a superficial daughter who trivializes even her mother's life. *Missing Mom*, like *I'll Take You There*, is narrated in the first person point of view. However, here the reader cannot see a reliable narration because the protagonist tries to adapt her mother's psychological narration into her own life. In *Missing Mom*, the reader must read between the lines in order to find out how the protagonist is a self-centered daughter.

With *Mudwoman*, to be examined in Chapter III, Oates takes her fictional exploration of the mother-daughter relationship to an altogether different level, in terms of both narrative technique and characterization. Unlike the two previous novels, *Mudwoman* is narrated in the

third person. Through the intriguing use of stream of consciousness passages, Oates traces the inner life of the protagonist M. R. Neukirchen, one of the two daughters of a woman with serious psychological problems. As in *I'll Take You There* and *Missing Mom*, the protagonist has conflicted feelings about her mother, but this time the mother's role in the daughter's psychological development is much more complicated and ambiguous. As the novel unfolds, the details of the tragedy that embroils Marit Kraeck and her daughters begin to emerge. One daughter is understood to have been killed as a very young child. The other daughter, M. R. Neukirchen, survives her ordeal with the help of a compassionate foster family and establishes a life as a successful academician. However, she fails to come to terms with her childhood experiences. At the end of the novel, she will find herself at the brink of complete mental breakdown. Of all three novels, in terms of narration, *Mudwoman* is the most complex one. Unlike the other two it is narrated in the third person point of view with the strong use of stream of consciousness. As the transitions between reality and phantasy are blurred, the novel requires a great deal of attentiveness from the reader.

## CHAPTER I

### *I'LL TAKE YOU THERE*

Joyce Carol Oates's *I'll Take You There* is about a young woman whose mother died of cancer when the daughter was only eighteen months old. The daughter starts her story with her life as a university student, returning to her earlier years every now and then in the course of her narration. In the first part of the novel, "The Penitent," the narrator's self-perception as well as her relationships with other women are shaped by her ambivalent attitude towards her mother, a deep ambivalence which carries echoes of the paranoid-schizoid position. This part also intimates that the narrator experiences certain feelings, especially that of guilt, something which suggests her inclination to move on to the depressive stage. However, the transition will be an arduous one, as even in the second part the reader will witness her failure to achieve reparation and normal mourning, two indicators of the depressive position in the Kleinian theory. Entitled "The Negro-Lover," this part concentrates on the narrator's relationship with her lover Vernor Matheius. Through her turbulent affair with Vernor, her reparation process becomes more obvious. In the last part, entitled "The Way Out," the narrator completes the Kleinian mourning stage and the reparation process: she is able to reconcile with the death of her mother by means of her interaction with her dying father.

#### **A. "The Penitent": Towards the Depressive Position**

In the Kleinian theory, "the infant's first relationship is to part-objects—primarily the mother's breast. These part-objects are split into an ideal breast—the object of the child's desire—and the persecutory breast, an object of hatred and fear, usually seen as fragmented" (H. Segal, 1980: 77). In *I'll Take You There*, the daughter had already lost the "good breast" when her mother, diagnosed with breast cancer, underwent mastectomy. The trauma she as an infant must have experienced at being wrenched away from the part-object of her mother's

breast is suggested early on in the novel, when the narrator recounts that she remembers almost nothing of her mother. The only images of her mother she knows are those in old family photographs, which are particularly painful to look at: “After my birth, my mother’s health was so poor that no snapshots of her with me were ever taken. No snapshots of the little one at all” (Oates 2002: 19). At first glance, the passage seems to express the narrator’s sadness at having lost her mother so soon, but it actually combines love and hate in a most striking way. On the one hand, the narrator—as an adult—grieves for her beloved mother, as she understands that it was the fatal illness which precluded her from uniting with her mother even in a photograph. On the other hand, she also harbors hate, because she—as “the little one”—was deserted by the mother, or rather, the bad breast.

The first part of the novel shows that the narrator, who is a freshman student, is still under the influence of her extremely conflicted emotions about her mother. Because the mother is not physically there for her to vent her frustration at, however, she turns against herself. The relish with which she tells of an occasion just before going to college, for example, evinces her self-destructive tendencies:

“Impulsively I cut off my hair when I was eighteen [...] I took my grandmother’s sewing shears, the big shears used for cutting thick fabrics like felt, and I ran off to my room and began cutting; slowly at first and then with mounting glee, almost a kind of gloating, *click! click!* just missing my ears, and with each greedy *click!* of the shears I felt lighter, freer.” (110)

The narrator’s aggression towards herself also makes itself felt in other passages where she describes her body. The nurse who takes the narrator’s weight in the Kappa Gamma Pi house (where she takes lodgings during her freshman year) is shocked to see that

she weighs only ninety-six pounds. The narrator, however, does not care about her own bodily health:

“I wasn’t interested in my normal weight” (107). Her indifference turns into outright dislike when she refers to her body as “papery-thin tallow-colored skin stretched tight upon slender bones, breasts the size of Dixie cups and hard as unripe pears, nipples the size of wizened peas and nothing at all like the warm roseate aureole of those girls’ breasts I presumed to be ‘normal’; the heavy, full breasts of other girls which looked as if already they held liquid, sweet milky precious liquid, the very elixir of life.” (107)

The passage demonstrates that the narrator indeed associates her physical appearance with that of her mother. Looking at her mother’s photographs, the narrator sees that as the latter’s health deteriorated, her appearance changed drastically: “Her chic bobbed hair was gone, now flyaway hair, or skinned back severely from her face and knotted at the nape of her neck. Her body had thickened, grown shapeless” (19).

Besides showing the extent of the narrator’s contempt for her own body, the passage also demonstrates how she is still preoccupied in her phantasy with her mother as part-object. The full breasts of the young women at the Kappa Gamma Pi House clearly represent the good breast, something which the narrator—as an infant—lacked in her mother, and still lacks—as an adult—in herself. A daughter starved by the bad breast, the passage brilliantly suggests, can only make an adult woman with a malnourished body and malnourishing breasts. Obviously, the narrator has not only failed to dispel her infantile hatred of the mother’s bad breast but has also turned that hatred against her own body.

The narrator’s emotional oscillations about her mother affect her behavior towards the Kappa girls as well. As her thoughts about their healthy bodies indicate, her feelings of

admiration for them blends with envy. Interestingly, her desperate attempts to make herself loved and appreciated by them demonstrates that she is also motivated by a feeling of guilt, something which suggests that she is beginning—but only just beginning—to move from the paranoid-schizoid position into the depressive position. According to the Kleinian theory, an infant begins to enter the depressive position on experiencing “his own destructive impulses have destroyed or will destroy, the object that he loves and totally depends on” (H. Segal, 1974, 69). The narrator has been in the throes of such an anxiety for a long time, an anxiety that engenders feelings of guilt as well. When she was a young child, her family kept accusing her of her mother’s untimely death: “They hated me for having been born; having been born, I caused our mother’s death [...]” (Oates, 2002: 19). According to Klein, the child’s sense of guilt forces him/her to make reparation with the good object which is nearly destroyed in his/her phantasy. In the narrator’s case, she tries to focus on the Kappa girls to find an object of reparation in place of the long-lost mother. By trying to make good relationships with the Kappa girls, the narrator tries to fill the empty place of her mother.

The first person she gets to know at college is Dawn, whom she describes as “a striking young woman; not pretty, nor even attractive, but glamorous like a film star of the Thirties with a perfect moon face” (41). She is so taken by Dawn that even the latter’s name becomes magical for her: “DAWN I’d find myself writing in my notebook or in the margin of a textbook or tracing with my fingernails in the gritty film of ice on the window of my room. DAWN DAWN” (42). In fact, Dawn becomes the main reason behind her wish to join the Kappa Gamma Pi sorority house.

During her university years, she continues to regard herself in similarly self-denigrating ways. When relating her experiences with the young women at the Kappa Gamma Pi house (where she takes lodgings in her freshman year), she compares herself with them: “Of the Kappas, I was the only girl who wore the same clothes day after day,” she explains, “[m]y

socks were mismatched but both were white wool. My hair lifted in uncombable clots of frizz, like iron fillings stirred by a passing magnet” (55).

In order to make herself accepted among the Kappa girls, the narrator even agrees to be taken advantage of: she does the girls’ homework and tolerates their late arrivals when she is the gatekeeper (15). However, when she realizes that Dawn and the other Kappa girls despise her, she begins to feel frustrated. Her feelings of rejection lead her to retaliate, by failing to do their homework.

The narrator’s complicated relationship with the Kappa girls finds a striking counterpart in her attachment to Mrs. Thayer, the mother of the sorority house. From the beginning, Mrs. Thayer behaves in a cold manner to the narrator. Mrs. Thayer keeps remembering the narrator’s name wrongly every time she addresses the narrator; calling her either Mary Alice or Janice (28,61). Despite this, the narrator wants to draw Mrs. Thayer’s attention and fill the gap of her missing mother. Although she tries to ingratiate herself with Mrs. Thayer, she cannot gain her appreciation. The narrator tries to perform her duties perfectly well so as to gain Mrs. Thayer’s approval. For example, when she becomes the gatekeeper, she wants to complete her shift perfectly because she wants Mrs. Thayer to be impressed. She carries her mail. Every now and again she questions herself as to why she acts in this way: “Why did I persist in volunteering to bring Mrs. Thayer her mail? She could have gotten it for herself. [...] Still I was drawn to the woman as one might be drawn to the most exacting of judges” (30). Failing to establish a close relationship with Mrs. Thayer, she feels disappointed and upset like a rejected child: “*Why did you never like me? Why did you repel me? Wasn’t I the one who read Punch? Did you never see how I adored you?*” (90, original emphasis).

According to the Kleinian theory, when the child does not achieve love and satisfy his/her needs, s/he attacks “the good object.” This aspect of the theory can be seen in the novel when the narrator breaks into Mrs. Thayer’s bedroom. In the Kappa Gamma Pi House several things are forbidden, for example as the narrator clarifies: “it was forbidden to enter Mrs. Thayer’s private quarters at any time, for any reason, unless Mrs. Thayer invited you inside” (28). However, even though going there is forbidden: “I found myself in the parlor blindly pushing open the door to Mrs. Thayer’s private quarters as if, in the midst of this confusion, our British housemother was there beckoning me inside” (87). She starts to eat Mrs. Thayer’s sweets. She states “Also in the cupboard was a wedge of chocolate nut fudge wrapped in aluminum foil. I broke off a piece of this fudge and tasted it and the concentration of sugar made my mouth ache” (91). Here the narrator undergoes an acute experience of the Kleinian “the good breast” and “the bad breast” conflict. Especially when she says “sugar made my mouth ache,” it is obvious that pleasure and pain exist simultaneously inside the narrator’s mind.

Catching the narrator in her room, Mrs. Thayer becomes furious and hits her. This incident destroys their relationship for good. The narrator says “I was a child, penitent, a child who has been punished, my heart broken” (93). With this occasion, the narrator loses her chance to achieve reparation with a woman who can be a substitute mother for her. She finally leaves the house without succeeding in reparation.

The ups and downs of the narrator’s relationship with the Kappa girls and Mrs. Thayer indicate that she is caught between the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions. Driven by the anxiety of having destroyed the good object on the one hand, and the desire to find an object of reparation on the other, she even resorts to conjuring up an imaginary sister. One curious habit of the narrator is to buy second-hand clothes. After yet another visit to a thrift store, she muses as follows: “I wondered who’d originally owned this beautiful and utterly

impractical belt: my lost twin, a girl with a twenty-three inch waist. She'd be grown up by now. If she was still alive" (177).

As it can be seen from these actions, in the first part of the novel, "The Penitent," the narrator is unable to come to terms with her dead mother. Although she attempts "reparation" through the Kappa girls, through Mrs. Thayer, and even through an imagined sister, the conflict between "the good breast" and "the bad breast" still remains the dominant element in her psyche. "Penitent" as she may be, her emotions hang precariously between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position.

#### **A. "The Negro-Lover": Towards Reparation**

In the second part of the novel, "The Negro-Lover," the narrator's conflicted emotions manifest themselves on a more abstract level, where she repeatedly separates herself from who she really is. When she fails to come forward and speak to a professor one day, all she can do is to retreat in silence: "*Biting my lip to keep from shouting my name. But suddenly I didn't know my name*" (75, original emphasis). Instead of using her real name, the narrator calls herself "Annelia." Interestingly, this is a name which can easily be misheard and mispronounced. For example, Vernor understands her name to be misheard "Annul-ia" which literally suggests erasure, annulment, annihilation (134). She explains the reason why she conceals her name as follows: "My own name was so common, ordinary, I'd begun to detect irony in its sound when it was spoken aloud. Since childhood I'd told myself *Differently named, you'd be a different person*" (144, original emphasis). The narrator is so repelled by her name that she even censors her own name while relating occasions when people address her directly, as in "Miss—" (206).

Revealed in her trouble with her name, the narrator's identity crisis becomes more evident in her fragmented actions. She "finds" herself at some places; she cannot recall how

she got there. She walks around as if she is unconscious. On one occasion, when she is thinking about Vernor she says, “I found myself in the basement of the Hall of Languages where there were additional classrooms, cramped and ill-lit and melancholy rooms” (121). When the narrator’s obsession with Vernor peaks her fragmented actions increase: “I worked in the library and often I found myself on the third floor” (165). These examples show that her thoughts and her actions are not synchronized.

The second part of the novel continues the theme of the narrator’s sense of fragmentation, and also demonstrates how she attempts at reparation through her relationship with Vernor. Although he keeps rejecting the narrator, she follows him as if she cannot survive without him. Vernor constantly asks her: “Tell me this one thing: what d’ you want?” (151, 222). The narrator’s experiences With Vernor are similar to her relationship with Thayer, but these difficulties are on a different level. However, this time she is determined not to let go of her obsession, Vernor. When Vernor rejects her again, she says “How lonely, I wanted to die. To cease to exist. For he had rejected me, repudiated me; sent me away [...]” (139).

Because her obsession with Vernor stems from her desire to alleviate the feeling of guilt imposed upon her ever since her infancy, she constantly thinks that she can love for both of them: “I can love enough for us both” (226). When Vernor gets ill for example, she takes care of him like a mother. In the end, when she cannot find the love she has been dreaming of, she blames herself: “I’d destroyed my own meager hope of happiness, I’d destroyed the purity of my own love for him; I’d destroyed Anellia, who was such a fool” (235). In spite of her desperate attempts to achieve reparation through Vernor, she is rejected by him as she has been rejected by Mrs. Thayer. Only this time she is much more hurt, both emotionally and physically. Towards the end of her relationship with Vernor, she finds out that he is a married

man who had abandoned his family. When he realizes that his secret has been exposed, Vernor beats the narrator and she has to run away from him.

### **B. “The Way Out”:In Mourning**

The third part of the novel subtitled, “The Way Out” evinces that the narrator has proceeded to a stage in her life that corresponds to the Kleinian mourning stage. In order to become a healthy individual, the child must get over her anxieties and feelings of guilt through reparation. The reparation process is intricately intertwined with the process of mourning which, if experienced in a normal way, enables the child to acquire an integrated ego (Klein, 1988: 266). The Kleinian theory conceptualizes the differences between normal mourning and abnormal mourning as follows:

“The fundamental difference between normal mourning, on the one hand, and abnormal mourning and manic-depressive states on the other, is this: the manic-depressive and the person who fails in the work of mourning, though their defenses may differ widely from each other, have this in common, that they have been unable in early childhood to establish their internal ‘good’ objects and to feel secure in their inner world. They have never really overcome the infantile depressive position.” (H. Segal, 1980: 82)

The narrator shifts from abnormal mourning to normal mourning towards the end of the novel. Because she lost her mother when yet an infant, she remains in the abnormal stage for a very long time. When she reconciles with her dying father, she is able to complete the mourning stage and move beyond her obsessions. The narrator talks to her sick father and calls him “Daddy” for the first time: “the man I’d known as my father whom I’d never called Daddy” (Oates, 2002: 255).

Two years after the narrator is separated from Vernor and she is graduated from university: she starts her career as a writer. She learns that her father, whom the family thought had died in a work-related accident a few years before, is actually alive but has terminal cancer. When she goes to visit him, she encounters Hildie Pomeroy, the second surrogate mother (after Mrs. Thayer) in the novel. The narrator learns that Hildie is her father's girlfriend. The narrator's relationship with Mrs. Thayer was composed of both longing and hatred, but with Hildie, the narrator establishes a less complicated relationship. She first depicts Hildie as "a hunched little woman with a fussily made-up doll's face" (Oates, 2002: 256). She sees Hildie as a monster on one occasion when Hilde touches her: "I was conscious of Hildie's sharp nails in my shoulder" (274). But eventually, the narrator learns to appreciate Hildie. The narrator owns that "she [Hildie] was an unnervingly attractive woman, despite her disfigured back" (261). She has finally matured enough to detach herself emotionally and not become affected by a surrogate mother figure.

The maturation in her thoughts occurs because she is now in the Kleinian normal mourning stage. Earlier the narrator had no time to mourn her mother's loss; however, with her father she can experience the normal mourning stage. Although her father did not pay much interest in her when she was young, she is now ready to forgive him and approach him with compassion. She tells him about her first book. In an effort to make her father happy, she also lies to her father that her brothers wanted to visit him. She does her best to bring her relationship with him to a satisfactory closure. She has been trying to find her identity and get rid of the sense of guilt which was caused by her mother's death. Reuniting with her father, she starts a new phase in her life.

Another important aspect in the mourning stage which Klein emphasizes is creativity. The child who is in the mourning stage can reflect his/her suffering through writing or drawing (Klein,1988: 336). In the first part of the novel, the narrator writes poems in a

tentative way, but her professional writing life begins in the last part of the novel when she is about to publish a poetry book. In that sense she completes the mourning stage by becoming a published writer.

The narrator is finally able to mourn her mother normally as she arranges for and attends her father's funeral. She feels a genuine sense of closure now that her father and mother are reunited in the same grave. Thus, she says, "[...] my family was now complete" (Oates, 2002: 290). The narrator obviously feels that she has completed her duties towards her lost mother.

The last sentence of the novel suggests that the narrator has been telling the entire story to a narratee with whom she is about to start a relationship: "If things work out between us, someday I'll take you there," (290) she tells the narratee. At this point, she is referring to the grave of her parents. The sentence demonstrates that she is no longer ridden with guilt in her new relationship as she was in her affair with Vernor Matheius. She gives a chance to herself and to the person with whom she is starting a new relationship. She is finally mature enough to approach her relationships tentatively not obsessively.

As observed, Klein suggests that, the infant must go through the "reparation" and "mourning" process for proper mental development. In Oates's *I'll Take You There*, the narrator initially goes through a stage where she projects her feelings of hatred towards her long-lost mother by despising her own body and experiencing an identity crisis. Her motherlessness causes her to feel lonely as well as guilty and as a result, she tries to make herself accepted by others such as the Kappa girls, Mrs. Thayer, and Vernor Matheius. She is finally able to complete the reparation process in the last part of the novel, where she is able to mourn for her mother through her relationship with her dying father. At last, she is ready to go on with her life in a much mature manner.

## CHAPTER 2

### *MISSING MOM*

Joyce Carol Oates's *Missing Mom* is narrated by the protagonist Nikki Eaton, a thirty-one-year-old woman whose mother Gwen is violently murdered by a man who used to do odd jobs for her. Nikki's narrative starts with the mother's day dinner held in her mother's house, a few days before Nikki finds Gwen dead in the garage. Nikki ends her narrative almost exactly one year after Gwen's death, when she starts a new relationship with Detective Strabane, the officer who conducts the inquiry into the murder. During this period, Nikki is transformed from a daughter who is disdainful of her mother to a woman very much like her. Analyzing *Missing Mom* within the framework of the Kleinian theory provides useful leads into Nikki's characterization, and togetherwith it, into Oates's thematic critique of middle-class values.

Indeed, what Nikki's relationship with her mother added interest (before and after the latter's death) is the way Oates comments obliquely on how the American middle-class lifestyle impacts mother-daughter relationships. As the critic Samuel Chase Coale states, "*Missing Mom* is meticulously anchored in middle-class American values and objects, from clothes and houses to habits and notions of status" (438). Oates's ironic outlook on Nikki's initial rebellion against what Nikki perceives as her mother's middle-class way of life and on how this rebellion turns into acquiescence—and even wholehearted approbation—becomes clearer as the story of "missing mom" unfolds.

As Samuel Chase Coale notes, Gwen's violent death impacts all the major characters of the novel in a bad way: "If individual selves were more or less intact before this blood-drenched iconic encounter, they certainly are not afterwards" (427). As in the case of the narrator in *I'll Take You There*, the one to be affected most by the mother's death is arguably

the daughter. However, Nikki's loss is different in one very important way: unlike the narrator in *I'll Take You There*, she is an adult when her mother dies. Therefore, the process of mourning is not as long-drawn and agonizing as that of the unnamed narrator in the previous novel. Hanna Segal explains Klein's thinking about mourning in adults as follows:

“Klein came to the conclusion that the disappearance of a loved object in adult life—an object which at a deeper level represents always a parental or sibling figure—reawakens in the mourner the conflicts of the depressive position. Because of the loss of the good external object and the reassurance its presence gave him, and with the increase of hatred toward that object for having left him, the mourner finds himself confronted not only with the pain of having lost the real external object but also, like the infant in the depressive position, under threat of losing the good objects in his internal world.” (1980: 80)

While mourning for her mother, Nikki displays both hatred and love towards her mother and tries to come to terms with the loss of “the real external object” by reconstructing her mother's life. She finally reestablishes “the good objects” in her “internal world” by modeling her emotional and sexual life on what she originally condemned as the conventional middle-class life of her mother. Nikki's transformation after Gwen's death will be analyzed through a demonstration of these three stages of mourning as revealed through her narration.

A few days after the mother's day dinner when her daughters see Gwen alive for the last time, Nikki is alerted by her sister Clare that Gwen is not answering phone calls. Nikkireluctantly goes to her mother's house to check on her. Finding Gwen lying lifeless in the garage, she desperately tries to resuscitate her. Afterwards, she thinks guiltily that Gwen was alive and looking at her when she found her. On another occasion, however, she blames her mother for trusting the murderer and for bringing him into her house: “[...] you are to

blame for what happened! what happened to you! what happened to us! you are to blame! you are to blame! you! you! no one else! Mom, why? Mom, why?” (Oates, 2005: 207). The contradictory nature of Nikki’s initial reactions to Gwen’s death—moving between the poles of guilt and hatred—anticipates the rest of the novel: during the one year that passes after she loses her mother, Nikki will move from one pole to another—this time from outright dislike into unconditional love towards her mother.

#### A. “Mom, you are not me, and I am not you”: The Rebellious Daughter

Actually, with *Missing Mom*, Oates gives us, “[t]he most positive portrayal of motherhood in [her] fiction to date” (Creighton and Binette, 455). Even though “Gwen was the glue that held family and friends together,” Nikki never appreciates her mother until she dies (Creighton and Binette, 455). When Gwen was alive, Nikki constantly distanced herself from her mother, openly blurting out her hostility: “Mom, you are not me, and I am not you. And thank God for that” (Oates, 2005: 35). Nikki also explains that she consciously tried to look different from Gwen. She describes what her mother wore for the mother’s day dinner as follows:

“For the occasion, Mom was wearing a lime-green velour top and matching pants, she’d sewed herself. Pink shell earrings she’d made in one of her crafts classes at the mall and a necklace of glass beads I’d found in a secondhand shop. Her graying-blond hair was attractively if modestly cut, her skin looked freshened as if she’d applied some sort of cold cream to it, then rubbed the cream vigorously off.” (7)

In sharp contrast, Nikki preferred short hair and an unconventional clothing style. When she cut and dyed her hair, Gwen was shocked: “Ohhh Nikki! What have you done with your *hair!*” (5, original emphasis). Remembering her mother’s reaction, Nikki makes the following comment in a mischievous way: “All I’d done was have my hair cut punk-spiky

style and darkened to a shade of inky –maroon that, in certain lights, glared iridescent. No strand of hair longer than one inch, shaved at the sides and back of my head” (6).

Nikki’s sardonic comments on her mother’s wardrobe as well as her insistence in wearing what she knows her mother will dislike is not simply a matter of a personal clash between a daughter and her mother. Oates places Nikki’s reaction to her mother firmly within the context of the novel’s critique of the American middle class way of life. Describing her mother’s youth, for example, Nikki makes the following sneering comment: “She’d been a blandly ‘cute’ high school cheerleader with the doll like features and aching hopeful smile of thousands—millions?—of the other girls immediately recognizable to any non-U.S. citizen as *American, middle-class*” (Oates, 2005: 8 original emphasis). As will be discussed in more detail in due course, Nikki’s criticism is gradually revealed to be one that smacks of hypocrisy, as Nikki eventually adapts her mother’s lifestyle to the smallest detail.

As with her mother, so with her elder sister Clare. Because Nikki also saw Clare as a copy of her mother, she also describes Clare’s style in a clearly sardonic tone: “Instead of my numerous funky-flashy rings and multiple ear-piercings, that gave my earlobes a look of frantic winking, Clare had her diamond-cluster engagement ring [...]”(9). Nikki emphasizes how Clare and her mother resembled each other: “Her face was a perfect moon like Mom’s, seemingly boneless, petulant-pretty and inclined toward doughtiness” (8). Nikki obviously regarded both her mother and Clare as ordinary, uninspiring women: “For everything about Clare was predictable and sensible: lilac polyester pants suit with a tunic top to disguise her thickening lower body, good black leather shoes with near little heel” (9).

Nikki not only associated Gwen and Clare in terms of their physical features and appearance but also suggests that her own outlook on sexuality was more liberal than theirs. Unlike Gwen and Clare, for example, she liked accentuating her sex-appeal in her wardrobe.

She zestfully mentions “[...] [her] tiny puckered-black-crepe top that fitted [her] torso tighter than any glove, nipple-tight you could say; and at [her] bare, luridly pale feet in gold-spangled high-heeled sandals” as well as her “glittery rings and ear studs and bold magenta lipstick” (11).

Nikki’s disagreement with Gwen’s and Clare’s sexual mores reveals itself also in her discussions of partners. Clare married Rob because her mother and her father approved of him. However, Nikki chose to start an affair with a married man –Wally Szalla–despite her mother’s and Clare’s objections.

#### **A. “I could hear Mom encouraging me”: The Mourning Daughter**

After Gwen’s death, Nikki and Clare start to shift positions. Once, Clare was the one who obeyed her parents, even in choosing her husband. Now that her mother is dead, she wants to divorce Rob. She is bitter at the way her mother shaped her life:

“I married Rob because I’d been made to feel guilty about not being married, made to feel guilty that Mom was anxious about me, made to feel that Mom was sad about me, how “exploited” I was by the school district which was true, certainly it was true, but the remedy needn’t have been marriage, I should have gone back to school and gotten a master’s degree or a Ph.D., I tried to explain to Mom but it was like speaking a foreign language. “Why, Clare, Rob Chisholm is the nicest man you’ve ever brought home to meet us”—“Rob Chisholm adores you”—“Your father respects Rob Chisholm, and you know how fussy Dad is.” (295)

In sharp contrast to Clare, the rebellious Nikki now feels all the more drawn towards memory of her mother. Soon after the murder, she moves into Gwen’s house despite the objections of Clare and Rob. As the critic Samuel Coale explains, she shows an unusual attachment to “the daily detritus that has gathered in the abandoned silence of her murdered mother’s house”

(438). Although Nikki says she is moving temporarily into her mother's house, at the end of the novel she will still be living there.

Nikki, who felt oppressed—maybe even persecuted—by her mother's annoying criticisms, seems to be undergoing an emotional change akin to what is involved in the Kleinian reparation:

“When persecution diminishes, the hostile dependence on the object, together with hatred, also diminishes, and the manic defences relax. The pining for the lost loved object also implies dependence on it, but dependence of a kind which becomes an incentive to reparation and preservation of the object.” (H. Segal, 1980: 110)

The change that has come over Nikki is evident even in the way she holds on to Gwen's clothes which she normally would never wear. Clare is astonished to see her sister's reluctance to give Gwen's belongings away: “Nikki! That isn't your taste at all. Lavender? ‘Pretty pink pastel’? You with your pierced ears and punk hair, you've got to be kidding” (Oates, 2005: 170). Her tendency to hold on to Gwen's things almost turns into an obsession, observed most strikingly in the attachment she develops to Gwen's cat Smoky. Although she is aware that her bond to Smoky is unusual, she can't help it: “Begging a cat for affection. This poor animal kept prisoner in my apartment.[...] I would make Smoky love me I vowed” (190).

Having appropriated her mother's house, clothes, and cat, Nikki also starts to do things that her mother did. For example, she tries to reproduce Gwen's recipes: “In the kitchen, at the bread board, kneading dough in the way Mom had tried to teach me, I felt peaceful and I was happy. For – almost!—I could see Mom in the corner of my eye. Almost!—I could hear Mom encouraging me” (282). She is so successful that she even amazes Aunt Tabitha, (her paternal uncle's wife): “You baked this? *You?* [...] Of course, Gwen's bread was like this,

too” (323, original emphasis). Nikki also takes to examining Gwen’s calendar in an effort to reproduce her daily life: “I’d taken over Mom’s calendar when I moved into Mom’s house, it seemed only logical. [...] It was painful to see. To retrace Mom’s days, weeks. She’d led what looked like a ‘busy’ life. A glance at her crowded calendar suggested this” (288). She continues to hear Gwen’s voice: “I could hear again Mom’s breezy remark, she couldn’t live without her calendar: ‘If I don’t write the least little thing down, I’ll forget it. So I always write everything down, and I never forget’” (289).

Nikki visits Aunt Tabitha even though she does not like her that much. She is willing to eschew the tediousness of being with Aunt Tabitha, simply because her visit will give her the opportunity to remember her mother: “It would be an ordeal to prepare a meal with my fussy aunt in her dreary kitchen, nothing like preparing meals with Mom in her cheerful kitchen where I’d fallen into the daughter/helper role, with Mom the boss” (328). When Aunt Tabitha gives her a sweater knitted by Gwen, Nikki of course happily accepts it (332).

#### **B. “In this way ended my first full year of missing Mom”: The Mother as Phantasy**

Nikki’s efforts to model her life on that of her mother do not remain merely on the level of copying her recipes and hoarding her personal belongings. She also begins to reconstruct Gwen’s earlier life, something which will lead her to see her *own* life almost as a repetition of that of Gwen. In other words, she tailors her mother’s past in a way that suits her best, not unlike the infant who negotiates reality by refashioning it in unconscious phantasy. One of the various functions of phantasy in Kleinian thought is “wish-fulfillment,” whereby a person “is not only avoiding frustration and the recognition of an unpleasant external reality, he is also, which is more important, defending himself against the reality of his own hunger and anger—his internal reality” (H. Segal, 1974: 16). As discussed earlier, Nikki’s anger at her mother when the latter was alive first turned into a feeling of hunger as evidenced by her

desire to own—in a sense devour—everything belonging to the mother. Now Nikki will proceed with wish-fulfilment, consuming her mother's past to feed it into her present and future.

The process begins when Nikki learns from her mother's cousin Lucille Kovach that Gwen's mother—Nikki's grandmother—"slashed both her forearms with a butcher knife" (Oates, 2005: 390). Gwen, who was eleven at the time, was the one who found her mother's dead body. Learning this secret, Nikki identifies herself with her mother, thinking that they both experienced the same tragedy.

Nikki also discovers that this suicide had other serious repercussions in Gwen's life. In the attic of the house, she finds letters to her mother from Father Brendan Dorsey with whom, Nikki realizes, her mother had had a secret affair when a very young girl: the affair ended when Dorsey, a young priest at the time, found out about the suicide and used it as an excuse to desert Gwen. In the last of his letters to Gwen, he wrote the following: "Because of your mother you 'have no faith in God.' [...] It is not just your lack of faith but other differences between us. I was confused and mistaken in our friendship. Please do not write to me again, Gwen [...]" (398-399). Nikki also finds out from Gwen's friend Alyce Proxmire that Gwen had a miscarriage from this affair.

Nikki's reaction to these sad revelations of her mother's life is curious. She suddenly decides to leave Wally Szalla, her married lover, and start a relationship with Detective Strabane, a single man. Whenever Wally visits her at her mother's house, Nikki feels disturbed. She does not even want to kiss him, let alone making love to him: "[...] his mouth seemed unfamiliar, not a mouth I kissed before. His warm breath, fleshy warm hands that were eager yet hesitant. I had an impulse to push him from me" (226). This event takes place in Nikki's girlhood room. She keeps remembering her past memories in this room and keeps

giggling. Upset at her reaction, Wally leaves. This incident is a striking example of Nikki's desire to return to the times when she was her mother's daughter.

Nikki's desire to replicate the life of her mother finds its counterpart in the narrative structure of the novel as well. If Gwen received letters from Dorsey, so does Nikki, from Strabane (Both sets of letters are clearly set off from the text of Nikki's narrative, something which demonstrates that Nikki regards their function to be similar). Running the investigation about Gwen's death, Strabane develops a special interest in Nikki: "I have been thinking about our conversation and want to tell you how sorry I am that I would seem to you the 'bearer of bad news'" (232), he writes to her in one of the notes. Initially, Nikki despises Detective Strabane, but he is persistent. He sends another card saying: "On the card I sent you last week, I forgot to include my home address" (233). Nikki is not aware that this is an ironic situation because Dorsey's letters must have caused a huge trauma in Gwen's life, whereas Strabane's cards are harmless little confessions of love. Nevertheless, in her persistent attempts to appropriate her mother's life for her own purposes, Nikki is obviously blind to the fact that her life is never the same as her mother's.

In short, Nikki does not merely want to remain Gwen's daughter; she clearly desires to become her mother. If Gwen once had an affair which would have met with social opprobrium, so does Nikki—her relationship with Szalla was not approved of by Gwen and Clare. If Gwen went on to establish a socially sanctioned life by marrying, so does Nikki: towards the end of the novel, Nikki leaves Szalla, a married man, and starts a relationship with Strabane, a single man. At the end of the novel, Nikki even takes Strabane to her parents' honeymoon hotel (431). It is significant because it implies that Nikki imagines a future similar to her mother's married life.

The final sentence of *Missing Mom* suggests that Nikki has no intention to move out of her mother's life into one of her own: "In this way," she writes, "ended my first full year of missing Mom" (434). The sentence implies that Nikki will go on revisiting her mother's life year after year. Both in its theme and narrative structure, then, *Missing Mom* implies the return of a daughter to the mother, but strictly on the daughter's terms.

In an interview, Joyce Carol Oates notes that she wanted to portray Gwen as an admirable female character:

"Gwen is an unusual individual in that, quite without irony, she is extraordinarily "nice." There is so very little that literature has been capable of saying about genuinely "nice," "good," "good-hearted" individuals that I took it as a sort of challenge to create a portrait of an unfailingly "nice" woman whose very "niceness" becomes a liability." (Farry 10)

The way Gwen is treated by Nikki both before and after her death shows that her niceness is indeed "a liability." When alive, she was the uninspiring housewife that Nikki despised; when dead, her life is appropriated by her daughter. This points to an interesting contradiction in Nikki's personality, a contradiction that borders on hypocrisy. Although repelled by her mother's middle-class way of life lifestyle when the latter was alive, Nikki readily adopts it after Gwen's death. Nikki's excessive attachment to Gwen after the latter's death is clearly motivated by self-interest. No matter how hard Nikki tries to establish parallels between her mother's life and hers, they are far from similar. Gwen was just a little girl when she experienced the trauma of seeing the dead body of her mother; but Nikki, as an adult, can and does overcome the shock of her mother's violent death much more easily. When Nikki finds the letters from Father Brandon Dorsey, she makes a connection to Strabane's simple cards as if she and her mother experienced the same thing. However, she is not abandoned by her lover

like her mother was; nor does Nikki go through the suffering of a miscarriage like her mother did. Firmly against her mother's middle-class way of life at the beginning, Nikki fails to see how Gwen actually suffered.

The ironic juxtaposition of Nikki's life with that of Gwen in the course of the novel provides an ingenious blending of what the critic Donald Spence refers to as "repetition" and "recursion" in narrative fiction. Spence explains that while "[s]omething that happens over and over comes to acquire a certain kind of lawfulness and expectancy" in real life as well as in narratives, it also runs the risk of losing interest, especially in narratives: "If repetition is too obvious or too mechanical, it acquires a distinctly non-human quality (189). In other words, narratives can become extremely tiresome if they do not introduce recursive variations into a story. As Spence puts it, "narrative recursion is a necessary part of narrative persuasion, and this comes about, in part, because it makes a bridge between fact and fiction and gives us a sense that the story we are being told is more than just a story and that it contains an important measure of lived truth—that is, wisdom" (189). By showing Nikki's conviction that she is repeating her mother's life on the one hand, and by subtly hinting that her life can never be the same as Gwen's on the other hand, Oates's narrative brilliantly combines repetition with recursion.

Analyzing *Missing Mom* within the framework of the Kleinian theory, then, provides insights not only into Nikki's psychology but also into the novel's subtle criticism of the pervasive influence of "middle-class American values" on the individual: the narrator/protagonist's critical stance against the sexual mores of her class, initially manifesting itself through a seemingly debilitating conflict with the mother, in the end erodes into complacent acquiescence, this time through a self-serving reconciliation with the mother. If there is a victim in the story, it is the mother who has been sacrificed to the hypocrisies of a conformist daughter pretending to be a social rebel. Thanks to her ironic juxtaposition of the

two women's lives in the narrative, Oates highlights the wrongs of the daughter by making readers appreciate the real sufferings of the mother.

## CHAPTER 3

### *MUDWOMAN*

Like *I'll Take You There* and *Missing Mom*, *Mudwoman* also revolves thematically around a mother-daughter relationship. Like the two previous novels, the focus is on the daughter who has to confront her mother's legacy in her attempt to establish a life of her own. This time, however, Oates presents a protagonist who ultimately fails to overcome the trauma of being mistreated by a mentally disturbed mother: unable to either remember or forget what she—and her sister—suffered as very young children, M. R. Neukirchen, now a forty-one-year old academician, gradually cuts herself off from the real world as her mental situation deteriorates. Neukirchen's partial memories of her mother's part in what happened to her (she was abandoned in the mudflats of Oates's fictional Beechum County, New York) and to her sister (she was found dead locked in a refrigerator) turn the novel into a harrowing story of extreme suffering.

Neukirchen's psychological problems can be analyzed under the Kleinian concept of the paranoid-schizoid position. According to *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, “[t]he chief characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position is the splitting of both self and object into good and bad, with at first little or no integration between them.[...] The establishment of a good internal object is thought by Klein to be a prerequisite for the later working through of the ‘depressive position’” (Spillius et al, 63). In *Mudwoman*, because the protagonist's memories of her mother are extremely stark, she never really manages to develop “a good internal object” in her mind. For Neukirchen, there is no good breast linked to a loving mother. Consequently, unlike the daughters in *I'll Take You There* and *Missing Mom*, Neukirchen can never accomplish the transition to the depressive position.

Oates's portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship in *Mudwoman* is quite different from the previous two novels in other important respects as well. In *I'll Take You There* and *Missing Mom*, the daughters' grievances against the mothers are engendered mainly by the daughters' unconscious phantasy, and not by the mothers' actual treatment of the daughters. The mother in *Mudwoman* is portrayed much more ambiguously, with the result that neither Neukirchen nor readers can ever ascertain the extent of her culpability in what befell her daughter as a young child. In the other two novels, Oates uses the first-person point of view. *Mudwoman*, by contrast, is narrated in the third person, which enables Oates to subtly alert the readers to the rifts between reality and Neukirchen's phantasy to great effect.

Indeed, *Mudwoman* abounds in rifts, especially in terms of characterization and plot structure. It presents a mother who—alternatively and simultaneously—may be seen as a criminal attempting to take the lives of her daughters or as a mentally disturbed woman attempting to protect them from harm. It gives (or suggests) two alternative versions of certain key events in the lives of the mother and the daughter. It features a daughter who flits between two identities as either the one or the other daughter of this woman. These rifts will serve as guidelines in the following reading of the mother-daughter relationship in *Mudwoman*.

#### A. "A forbidden sight": The Mother

The first chapter of *Mudwoman* is composed of a fragmented narrative line that introduces the protagonist as a little girl. The incidents go back and forth between the Herkimer County detention facility (where her mother cuts the girl's hair and nails); a courtroom (where the mother is denied custody of her daughter); a motel room (where the girl is subjected to the abuse of an adult male) and the mudflats of Beechum County, New York (where the daughter is abandoned). In this way, Oates gives a foretaste of Neukirchen's confused and disoriented state of mind to be explored in detail in the rest of the novel.

While cutting her daughter's hair and nails at the detention center, the mother—who is named as Merit Kraeck later on—hurts her: The little girl “shuddered, and squirmed, and whimpered, and wept; and the woman had no choice but to slap the child's face, not hard, but hard enough to calm her, as often the woman did” (Oates, 2012: 2). The mother's violence blends with the little girl's helpless fear:

“Though the child was frightened she managed to hold herself still except for shivering as the baby rabbit will hold itself still in the desperate hope that is most powerful in living creatures, our deepest expectations in the face of all evidence refuting it, that the terrible danger will pass.” (3)

The terrified daughter undergoes an even more horrifying experience, when the mother evidently tries to lock both her daughters up in a refrigerator dumped in the mudflats: “She will put us inside that one” (8) the little girl thinks (or says). “She has put us inside of that one,” the little girl continues: “She has shut the door” (8). In later chapters, readers find out that one of the sisters was indeed found dead, locked in a refrigerator.

Read from the little girl's perspective, the mother turns out to be a deadly criminal who seeks to murder her own daughters. It is no wonder, then, that the little girl is never able to find the good breast, either in reality or in phantasy. As such, the novel can be read as a fictional reenactment of a pathological mother-daughter relationship where the infant, unable to secure “a ‘good object’ to turn to in times of pain and anxiety,” becomes “vulnerable to confusion and persecution” (Spillius et al, 258).

Read from the reader's perspective, however, the mother's actions may come to acquire a subtext not visible to such a young child. The very first paragraph of the novel provides the first clue, suggesting that Marit does not harm her daughters out of a tendency to gratuitous violence. Marit refers to the mudflats of Beechum County are where she take the

little girls as “the land of Moriah” (Oates, 2012: 1). She is “awaiting an angel of God to appear her” (9). These allusions indicate that she is obsessed with the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac. According to the Old Testament story, God wants to test Abraham’s obedience by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac on the Mount Moriah. Just as Abraham is about to slit his son’s throat an angel speaks and tells him to stop. At that moment, Abraham sees a ram in the bushes and sacrifices the ram instead of his son. In this way God tests Abraham’s faith and obedience (Kessler 66). The parallels between the biblical story and Marit’s actions suggest that she is reenacting Abraham’s story and sacrificing her children to God.

That Marit may be suffering from religious delusions gains more credibility later on in the chapter. In the brief scene in the courtroom, on hearing that her children might be given to foster care, the mother calls the judge, using biblical vocabulary once again, as the “Whore of Babylon” (Oates, 2012:7).<sup>4</sup> Her violent reaction to the judge also shows that she does not want to be separated from her daughters.

The scene in the mudflats offers another possible explanation of Marit’s motivation behind her actions. Here, too, Marit appears to be acting on a religious motive. On seeing a snake, she calls it “Satan” (9). The reference is clearly to the story of Adam and Eve, where the latter is tempted by the devil who is disguised as a snake (“Eve,” 359).

Once again, it is another fragmentary scene in the first chapter, the one in the motel, that provides a viable answer. Once again, the little girl is unable to understand what is exactly going on, but what happens is clearly child abuse. Although the man involved is unknown by in this chapter, subsequently he is identified as one of the mother’s male partners, Tyrell. In the little girl’s words, Tyrell plays with her “*the secret game of tickle*” in the bathroom (Oates, 2012: 4, original emphasis).

As revealed in subsequent chapters, the police suspected that someone other than Marit might have been involved in what happened to the little girl in the mudflats, because they knew Marit to be an “excessively religious” and “troubled” person who lived in a “squalid little rented house not much larger than a packing crate with a sequence of men taking advantage of her” (142- 143). After the little girl was found alive in the mudflats, the local officials suspected of the involvement of a man but could not find any substantial evidence (170).

By subtly sprinkling clues about the mother’s motives in undertaking what to a little girl might seem gratuitous violence, then, Oates invites readers to go beyond the daughter’s (inevitably incomplete and naïve) perspective of her mother. In the following chapters, Oates suggests that even as an adult, the daughter will never recover from the trauma of her childhood to get a glimpse of her real mother. M. R. Neukirchen sees Marit only once more, towards the end of the novel: now aged forty-one, she learns that her mother is alive. She plucks up the courage to visit Marit who, now a patient at the Herkimer State Psychiatric facility, does not (or cannot) communicate with anyone. Neukirchen is overwhelmed by what she sees: “On the sofa she sat with legs asprawl, the fatty folds of her thighs uncomfortably visible to M.R. who was facing her. Almost, M.R. wanted to hide her eyes, like a child in a fairy tale exposed to a forbidden sight” (382). Sadly but understandably, she fails to recognize the fact that the woman before her eyes is not a fairy tale monster, but only a woman with severe mental problems.

### **B. “A sensation of such unease”: The Daughter**

Bringing the mother and the daughter together only at the beginning and the ending of the narrative, Oates devotes the developing sections of the novel to the daughter’s desperate but finally futile struggle to come to terms with the horrifying events that befell her as a child.

As in the first chapter, readers are encouraged to read the novel through two perspectives—that of the daughter and that of their own. To this end, Oates makes the third-person narrator superimpose one reading of certain key incidents over another.

Before an examination of these key incidents, a brief summary of Neukirchen's life after she survived the ordeal in the mudflats is in order. Having been discovered there and rescued by a young man called Suttis, the little girl was given to foster care with the Skedds family, and then permanently adopted by the Neukirchens, who named her Meredith Ruth Neukirchen. Thanks to her foster family, she flourished as a brilliant student at school and at University, eventually becoming a successful academician.

The first occasion where a key incident is presented twice in the novel comes in the second and third chapters. In the second chapter, readers encounter Neukirchen as an adult for the first time: having just become the first female woman president of an Ivy League University, she travels to Cornell University to attend a conference. Although aware of the importance of this occasion (she has been invited as the key speaker), she just cannot help hiring a car and hitting the road aimlessly only a few hours before her speech. On the way, she thinks that she is close to her foster parents' house; however, she does not have a plan on seeing her foster father. While driving through a by-road, she thinks she sees a child lying on the road: in order not to hit the child she swerves the car into a ditch. Getting out of the car with difficulty, she realizes that what she saw on the road was a doll (45).

When she gets out of the car, Neukirchen spots another rubber doll, children's clothes, as well as another object reminiscent of the mudflats incident: a refrigerator. Unlike the readers, Neukirchen does not link the refrigerator to the events that took place in the mudflats, at least not consciously: "M.R stooped to inspect the refrigerator. Of course it was empty—the shelves were rusted, badly battered. There was a smell. A sensation of such unease—

oppression—came over her, she had to turn away” (46). As in the first chapter, Oates prompts readers to pose these questions but withholds definite answers: in this way, Oates’s third-person narrative makes the readers get as close as possible to the protagonist’s tortured state of mind, where traumatic memories are simultaneously repressed and revealed.

There is one more very subtle way in which Oates prompts readers to ask these questions. The places Neukirchen drives through just before the accident happen to be the same places mentioned in the first chapter. While driving across several counties in the second chapter, Neukirchen feels as if she has been there before: “She was passing the Old Dutch Road—was this familiar?—and the Sandusky Road” (42). She is hardly conscious that she is searching for those places she was taken to by her mother: “she drove into Cortland County, and she drove into Madison County, and she drove into Herkimer County and into the foothills of the Adirondacks and at last into Beechum County” (37). The last two stops are important, because Neukirchen and her mother lived in Herkimer County. It is here, in the mudflats in the vicinity of Black Snake River, Beechum County, that her traumatic childhood experiences took place. The careful mapping out of these places in a parallel fashion in the first two chapters shows that Neukirchen, as an adult, is in fact travelling within the geographical as well as the psychological map her mother drew for her years ago. When she hits the road in the second chapter, she cannot manage to extricate herself from this mental terrain. She thinks that she has hit the road aimlessly, but (as her final encounter with her mother in final chapter suggests) she has been circling around an invisible map in search of her mother. Neukirchen’s entire mental life is shaped by her repressed memories of her mother.<sup>5</sup>

Oates demonstrates the confused state of mind of her protagonist by offering an entirely different reading of what happens to Neukirchen when she hits the road. This reading suggests that after the car accident Neukirchen actually fell unconscious: “Waking with a

pounding head, a bloodied face, near-smothered by exploded air bag and near-strangled by the safety harness—a stranger stopping above the car overturned in a ditch calling to her *Hello? Hello? Hello? Hello? Are you—alive?*” (91, original emphasis). This version shows that Neukirchen, while lying unconscious in the car, actually dreamed or imagined that she saw certain objects (a doll, a refrigerator, children’s clothes), something which fact indicative of her repressed memories coming to the surface.

Through two other key incidents in subsequent chapters, incidents which are related in two different versions, Oates shows Neukirchen to be not only repeatedly losing her grip on reality but also developing severe persecution anxiety. According to Klein, the infant in the paranoid-schizoid position is liable to suffer from this type of anxiety, which stems from the fear that the good object s/he has destroyed in phantasy will return to destroy him/her (H. Segal, 1980: 122). The first incident that shows Neukirchen suffering from this anxiety has to do with her being almost raped by one of her colleagues called Heidemann: “the heavysset man was close behind her, seizing her in his arms—his Buddha-belly pressing against her back. [...] Hands crude as welders’ gloves closed over her breasts, [...]. She opened her mouth to scream but could not scream” (Oates, 2012: 314). She then attacks him to protect herself: “M.R. lifted something, an object she’d grabbed with which to protect herself, a rod of some kind, about three feet in length and made of iron” (315). The incident begins to sound more and more improbable when she not only kills Heidemann but cuts his body into pieces (321). That all these events have occurred in Neukirchen’s mind becomes clear eventually: when she is hospitalized after falling off the stairs at her house, she receives a get well card from Heidemann (342).

The second incident which attests to the severity of Neukirchen’s persecution anxiety takes place towards the end of the novel, about a month after she visits her mother in hospital. At the beginning of the last chapter, Neukirchen seems to have recovered from her troubles

after a medical leave of three months. She even visits her foster father Konrad Neukirchen. During this visit, she talks about her childhood memories with Konrad. However, on her way back to the University, she begins to make erratic decisions—very much like the time when she had the car accident in the second chapter. Driven by a desire to find out about her real father (probably catalyzed by her visit to her stepfather), she stops by a restaurant and a gas station to ask employees whether they know a man named Kraeck. This can be considered as an example of Neukirchen’s wayward behavior. Just as she is leaving, she runs into a hitchhiker: “a tall lanky dirty-skinned boy of some indeterminate age—mid-twenties?—or older—slouched less than ten feet behind her on the trail” (423). When she refuses to give him a ride, the young man wants to mug her and steal her car, which leads to a scuffle. Neukirchen manages to escape, but hits him with her car: “he had time to get out of her way surely, but stood his ground, defiantly, refused to move as the left front fender stuck him—not hard, but hard enough to knock him aside, as the car rushed past [...]” (428). As she drives away, she thinks that she might have killed the hitchhiker.

As the novel ends inconclusively with this event, there seems to be no clues as to whether it actually takes place in reality or in Neukirchen’s mind, in contrast to the Heidemann incident. However, the similarities between the two events are too strong to be coincidental: in both, Neukirchen encounters a man with whom she is not too familiar, is assaulted by him, and attacks him in order to save herself. In other words, the hitchhiker incident is most likely another product of Neukirchen’s phantasy.

There are several conclusions to be drawn from the juxtaposed reading of the two incidents. First, they demonstrate the severity of Neukirchen’s persecution anxiety. Secondly, and even more strikingly, they point to the origins of this anxiety in a third male character in the narrative: this character happens to be none other than Tyrell. Although these three men seem totally different from each other in terms of their clothing style, appearance,

and age, Oates once again provides tell-tale clues to readers, suggesting that Heidemann and the hitchhiker incidents point to her repressed memories of the sexual abuse that she, in her childhood, suffered at the hands of Tyrell. All the three men have one common characteristic: they all laugh or smile mockingly. Tyrell is described in the novel as a man “who liked to laugh and his gums wetly bared when he laughed” (142). Heidemann, too, is also pictured as constantly laughing at Neukirchen’s face cynically: “Heidemann laughed, a sound as of foil being shaken, mirthless but percussive” (313). The hitchhiker also sports a distinctive type of amusement, a “mock-respectful” smile, like Tyrell and Heidemann (424).

In case some readers may miss these subtle parallels between the two men and Tyrell, Oates brings the latter into the novel once again towards the end of the novel, when Neukirchen remembers the game of tickle, just before the hitchhiker incident happens. Driving home from visiting her foster father, she goes back into her childhood again: “The big stained claw-footed bathtub in the smelly bathroom. The game of tickle! M.R. only just remembered” (420). In this way, it is suggested that Tyrell is the main reason why Neukirchen and her sister suffered so much.

Narrated with significant variations, these three incidents display a recursive pattern. The novel is full of recursive incidents that enable readers to reach an understanding of the real events behind Neukirchen’s repressed memories. As discussed in the previous chapter, on *Missing Mom* recursive narration is “both repetitive and distinctive” (Spence 190). *Mudwoman* utilizes repetition by making Neukirchen experience persecution anxiety over and over again; it utilizes recursion by showing the demons of her phantasy to appear in different costumes. In his discussion of narrative recursion in fiction, Donald Spence observes that some narratives employ “symmetrical recursions—boxes within boxes—which purposely move down only a fixed number of levels and then reverse the process to end up where they began” (201). Various characters and incidents in *Missing Mom* show Oates’s brilliant use of just

such a type of recursion. At the beginning of the novel, Neukirchen is involved in a car accident, which leads to stirrings in her unconscious; towards the end of the novel she thinks that she has killed a hitchhiker again in a car accident. Tyrell is mentioned at the beginning of the novel as the one who plays “game of tickle” with Neukirchen. At the very end of the novel, Neukirchen remembers once again remembers Tyrell and the “game of tickle.” Most importantly, the mother appears twice, at the beginning and the end of the novel.

### C. “Not *Jedina* but *Jewell*”: The Sister

There is one more example of the intermixing of repetition and recursion in the novel, which brings another important character into focus through passages where dolls are mentioned: this character is Neukirchen’s sister, who died an unspeakable death. The repeated appearances of dolls in the novel demonstrate that Neukirchen’s repressed memories of her sister are extremely disturbing: whenever her unconscious phantasy threatens to bring the sister to the surface, she can only handle the memory through using the doll as a symbolic object.

The doll brings echoes of the mudflats incident in the first chapter, where the little girl keeps holding a doll tightly until her mother flings it away in the mudflats: “the woman pried Dolly from the child’s fingers and tossed Dolly out into the mud” (2012: 9). Readers encounter the doll once again when Neukirchen thinks she hits the hitchhiker she feels that “histhin body was deflected andtossed aside as one might toss aside a rag doll[...].” (428).

Associated in Neukirchen’s phantasy with the doll, the experience of the sister’s death also seems to have caused Neukirchen to suffer from what Klein refers to as “extreme splitting”: “If a ‘bad object’ dominates internal life the individual may resort to extreme splitting in order to manage the persecution and may fragment to disperse the badness and get rid of his own experience” (Spillius et al, 258).

Neukirchen's splitting is evidenced best by the way in which she alternately and confusedly (as well as confusingly for the reader) refers to herself with different names. The protagonist's problematic relationship with names is similar to that of the narrator in *I'll Take You There*. It will be remembered that in that novel, too, the narrator is given various names, such as "Mary Alice", "Janice," and "Annelia" (Oates, 2002: 28, 61, 134). However, unlike the nameless narrator in the first novel, in Neukirchen's mental health is severely impaired.

Oates underlines Neukirchen's psychological deterioration by withholding a very important piece of information from readers. The central question of who she was as a child is never satisfactorily resolved throughout the novel: was she the three-year-old Jewell, or was she the sister, the five-year-old Jedina? After she was rescued from the mudflats she insisted that she was "Not *Jedina* but *Jewell*" (Oates, 2012:141, original emphasis). Years later as an adult, when she visits her mother at the Herkimer State Psychiatric Facility, she says that she is Jedina (378). Neukirchen's identity crisis thus informs her splitting, and vice versa.

After she was adopted by the Neukirchens, she was given a new name, Meredith Ruth Neukirchen, which she assumes throughout her adult life. Interestingly, however, she always initializes her first names as M. R.: she is clearly not comfortable with spelling them out fully. The reason for her unease with the name is suggested later, when she remembers that the name originally belonged to the biological daughter of the Neukirchens. Once, the young Neukirchen secretly followed her foster father and saw him staring at a grave. When he left, she read the headstone: "Meredith Ruth Neukirchen September 21, 1957—February 3, 1961" (291). She realized then that this grave belonged to her foster parents' daughter who died at the age of four, just about the age when one of Marit Kraeck's daughters actually, and the other (the protagonist herself) nearly, died. Unknowingly, she has been made to inherit the name of a dead girl: it is not surprising that she never warms to this name (or the diminutive 'Merry' which her foster parents call her), although she officially assumes it as an adult.

Hence M. R., her modification of a name which she understandably evades making her own. She feels that she is not the person that her foster parents think (or desire) her to be: “*I am not—Merry. I am Jewell*” (218, original emphasis).

In fact, the trouble M. R. Neukirchen has with names (and identities) is suggested from the very beginning, by means of the title of the novel, *Mudwoman*. On the most obvious level the word “mud” is used as pun for the word “mad.” Yet, Oates is not satisfied with such a simple play upon words and makes readers ask a lot of questions about the novel’s title and its connection to Neukirchen’s story. “Mudwoman” is a nickname which Neukirchen frequently attributes to herself, together with “Mudgirl”: “Mudgirl would cherish through her life” (2012:8). “*President Neukirchen! Who’n hell is Mudgirl kidding!*” (185, original emphasis). “In the mirror stared at her *Mudwoman!*” (278). *Why should Mudgirl give a damn too?*” (296). “*She [her foster-mother Agatha] does see into my heart. She knows me. Mudwoman!*” (358, original emphasis).

To conclude, in *Mudwoman*, the reader, as much as the protagonist, is thrown into the midst of a mental landscape as disorienting and threatening as the mudflats where she was evidently left to die. If the reader compares the last two novels that are analyzed, the thematic result in *Mudwoman* is entirely different from that of the previous novel. In *Missing Mom* recursive narration highlights the selfishness of a bourgeois character, who manipulates her mother’s past life. In *Mudwoman*, by contrast, the daughter is unable to shape her own life due to her painful relationship with her mother.

## CONCLUSION

In *I'll Take You There*, *Missing Mom* and *Mudwoman*, Joyce Carol Oates explores the various facets of mother-daughter relationships through stories of daughters who have to come to terms with the loss of their mothers. The Austrian-British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's object-relations theory, which posits that the psychological reverberations of an infant's early relationship with the mother continue well into adulthood, provides a particularly useful framework for a study of the processes that shape the daughter's emotional responses to her mother in each of these three novels.

The first Oates novel studied in this thesis, *I'll Take You There*, is about a young woman who, as a result of her mother's untimely death, does not remember much of her. Consequently, she is in search of a motherly figure. She seeks love and compassion constantly in her relationships, not only with the women but also with the men in her life. As she keeps failing in these relationships, she experiences an identity crisis, which is revealed especially in the names she chooses to give herself. Finally, however, she is able to enter the depressive stage, which enables her to mourn for her mother: she accomplishes closure only when she restores her weak relationship with her father who, dying of cancer like her mother, serves as a substitute mother figure for her.

As in *I'll Take You There*, the process of the daughter's mourning for her mother is the central issue in *Missing Mom*. In *I'll Take You There*, however, the protagonist's trauma is genuine as opposed to that of the daughter in *Missing Mom*. The protagonist Nikki in *Missing Mom* is thirty-one years old when her mother dies. Although she feels guilty and remorseful like the protagonist of *I'll Take You There*, she is able to complete her mourning much more easily, by beginning to imitate her mother's lifestyle. In fact, she acts hypocritically because when her mother was alive she rejected and despised her middle-class way of living but after

her mother's death, she embraces the samelife without questioning her own conformism. Oates's critical outlook on Nikki is evident in her descriptions of her protagonist: "[Nikki] is not an intellectual. [...] She doesn't have much of a career, she has never really got a good job, she never really got a good education" (qtd. in Araújo, 102). Nor has she made anything of her private affairs: "She falls in love and she falls out of love and her life is kind of going nowhere" (qtd. in Araújo, 102). As discussed above, Nikki's relationship with her mother is as hollow as her love affairs. She is ultimately shown to be a fickle daughter with a dim understanding of her mother's sufferings. Nikki will never understand that her mother, as a young woman who was led into a relationship that would definitely meet middle-class opprobrium, Gwen had no option other than adopting the very mores that came at the traumatic cost of her giving birth to a stillborn baby. As Eleanor Alexander explains with reference to Gwen's generation, "[m]iddle-class women were cloistered at home, charged with being cheerful, and running orderly households" (126). The shocking irony with respect to Nikki, as Oates shows us, is that she not only holds her mother up to ridicule for being forced into such a role but also ultimately embraces the very values that made her mother suffer so much.

*Mudwoman* is the most complicated and challenging one among the Oates novels discussed in this thesis. The protagonist M.R. Neukirchen is exposed to physical and emotional cruelty as a very young child and is haunted by her memories throughout her adult life. Although at first glance her mother seems to have been the cause of her childhood traumas, Oates shows that as a mentally disturbed woman, she tried but failed to protect her two daughters. Nevertheless, Neukirchen cannot move beyond the Kleinian paranoid-schizoid position as she experiences acute persecutory anxiety and split personality. As in *I'll Take You There*, the character Neukirchen is called with several names, suggesting the emotional turbulence in the protagonist's life.

In each novel, Oates uses a specific narrative technique best suited to the representation of the protagonist's state of mind. Both in *I'll Take You There* and *Missing Mom*, the protagonists narrate their own stories, but with widely different consequences. Because the protagonist in *I'll Take You There* experiences the mother's loss in a truly painful way, she becomes a reliable narrator. In *Missing Mom*, in contrast, the protagonist Nikki can be regarded as an unreliable narrator who falls short of understanding what her mother must have gone through as a young woman, and fabricates her mother's story in a way that suits her own conventional middle-class existence. For *Mudwoman*, Oates chooses the third-person point of view dotted with stream-of-consciousness passages in order to highlight the disjunction between reality and the protagonist Neukirchen's increasingly disintegrating inner world. In this way, she assigns readers a challenging task, similar to the one which Neukirchen undertakes but fails to achieve: they are encouraged to virtually experience Neukirchen's inner struggles on the one hand, and not to lose sight of the factual world of the story on the other.

Donald Spence notes that "[i]n both music and real life there is almost no limit to the number of permutations we can listen to or watch for; thus we seem to enjoy sameness, perhaps even need it, when combined with difference" (190). If Kleinian theory demonstrates the unchanging psychological aspects of mother-daughter relationships, each of Oates's later novels turns Klein's insights into fascinatingly unique fictional narratives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Of all the three novels only the first novel, *I'll Take You There* is translated into Turkish and the title is, *Bir Gün Beraber Gideriz* (Bulut).

<sup>2</sup>See Wesley, Marilyn C. "Father-Daughter Incest as Social Transgression: A Feminist Reading of Joyce Carol Oates" (252) for critics who label Oates as an anti-feminist. For Wesley these critics are, Susan Cornillon, Joanne Creighton, Marion Engel, Mary K. Grant, and Clynthia Stevens. Wesley explains that they are unfair to Oates, as they do not consider "the social inquiry or the strategies of resistance her disturbing narratives also include" (252).

<sup>3</sup>Klein uses the term "phantasy" in order to distinguish unconscious fantasies from conscious fantasies.

<sup>4</sup>In *The Old Testament*, the Great Babylonian Goddess Ishtar is referred to as "the Great Whore, described in Revelation 17:5 as Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots" (Walker 450-52)

<sup>5</sup>Oates is known to create maps for her novels. As she puts it in an interview, "[t]o me it is very visual. [...] It is not that we really have to be or stay in one place but we sort of come from a place and we have a romantic connection and a mystical connection with it" (Araújo, 103). In another interview, Oates expands upon her keen sense of place: "America is a land of numerous regions as well, each of which has an identity, yet is linked inextricably with the other" (Cologne-Brookes 553). In short, Oates wants her readers to know where her characters come from.

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