

## SHADOWS OF THE UNSEEN: MATERNAL ABSENCE AND THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY

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### Abstract

*This article explores the profound impact of maternal absence on the construction of identity in three contemporary novels: Ian McEwan's Atonement (2001), Patrick McGrath's Asylum (1996), and Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987). By utilizing the Lacanian idea of "Lack", the study depicts the profound impact of parental absence on the formation of one's identity. The potential impact of Lacanian theory on the characters' self-perception and identity formation is analyzed and it specifically focuses on the absence of the mother figure. Additionally, it considers trauma and attachment theory when examining the psychological effects of this absence, with a particular emphasis on how the presence of a mother figure influences the formation of one's identity. This study aims to analyze the several ways in which narratives depict and mirror the intricate duality of maternal absence and psychological "lack," and how these factors impact the emotional and psychological growth of the main characters. The objective of this study is to contextualize these literary works within a broader theoretical framework in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the intricate connection between maternal influence, trauma, and the development of one's identity. This further contributes to the ongoing conversation on the significance of mother characters in literature and their exceptional influence on the formation of personal identity.*

**Keywords:** Lack, Object petit A, Identity, Trauma, Attachment theory, Motherhood, Absent mother trope, Gothic

## GÖRÜNMEYENİN GÖLGELERİ: ANNE YOKLUĞU VE KİMLİK ARAYIŞI

### Özet

*Bu makale, Ian McEwan'ın Atonement (2001), Patrick McGrath'ın Asylum (1996) ve Toni Morrison'ın Beloved (1987) adlı çağdaş romanlarında anne yokluğunun kimlik inşası üzerindeki derin etkisini incelemektedir. Lacancı "Eksiklik" kavramını kullanarak, ebeveyn yokluğunun kimliğin oluşumu üzerindeki derin etkisini tasvir etmektedir. Lacancı teorisinin karakterlerin kendilik algısı ve kimlik oluşumu üzerindeki potansiyel etkisi analiz edilmekte ve özellikle anne figürünün yokluğuna odaklanılmaktadır. Ek olarak, bu yokluğun psikolojik etkilerini incelerken, travma ve bağlanma teorisi de göz önünde bulundurulmaktadır; özellikle anne figürünün varlığının kimlik oluşumunu nasıl etkilediğine vurgu yapılmaktadır. Bu çalışma, anlatıların anne yokluğunun ve psikolojik "eksiklik"i karmaşık ilişkisini nasıl tasvir edip yansıttığını ve bu faktörlerin ana karakterlerin duygusal ve psikolojik gelişimini nasıl etkilediğini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın amacı, bu edebi eserleri daha geniş bir teorik çerçevede ele alarak, anne etkisi, travma ve kimlik gelişimi arasındaki karmaşık bağlantıyı kapsamlı bir şekilde anlamaktır. Bu, edebiyatta anne karakterlerinin önemi ve kişisel kimlik oluşumu üzerindeki olağanüstü etkisi üzerine süregelen tartışmalara katkıda bulunmaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Eksiklik, Object petit A, Kimlik, Travma, Bağlanma teorisi, Annelik, Yok olan anne motifi, Gotik

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## Introduction

Parental absence or neglect is a recurring theme in Gothic literature. These three works fully adhere to the Gothic style and depict the traumatic effects on families caused by abusive, careless, or absent moms. Undoubtedly, the perils and psychological distress experienced by the protagonists are essential elements at the heart of Gothicism. If moms were there and able to provide protection and guidance to their children, both girls and boys would not have had difficulties or suffered traumatic events. In such circumstances, it would be unlikely for them to turn to Gothic as a solution. To clarify, Gothic literature does not favor moms, particularly virtuous mothers, since they have a detrimental impact on the progression of the narrative. Thus, the mother characters depicted in these works serve as representations of absent and harmful maternal figures that are often seen in Gothic literature. The absence of a mother figure is often the primary catalyst for the narrative in the work of literature, sometimes referred to as the absent mother trope or the lack of mother trope. The mother characters in the three books are shown as inadequate or insufficient in meeting the children's needs in the conventional manner.

### 1. The Analysis of Atonement

One of the elements explored in this article is the debate involving Briony and her connection with her mother, which serves to illustrate Emily Tallis' perspective as a mother. Given that the absent mother trope is a fundamental element of Gothic Fiction, the relationship between the mother and daughter in *Atonement* explores the evolution of their bond. Initially, the mother is depicted as emotionally nurturing, but later becomes an absent figure due to her biological absenteeism caused by her migraine attacks. What follows is an example of Emily Tallis's emotional support for Briony:

*She took her daughter in her arms, onto her lap - ah, that hot smooth little body she remembered from infancy, and still not gone from her, not*

*quite yet -and said that the play was "stupidous," and agreed instantly, murmuring into the tight whorl of the girl's ear...<sup>1</sup>*

Emily reads through Briony's play and the praise she gives it brings great satisfaction to Briony. Briony experiences an immense sense of satisfaction for the project after her mother makes a comment. At the start of the story, it is evident that their connection remains intact. However, Emily's role as a loving mother hinders the development of the narrative until her migraine episodes emerge. In her work, Ruth highlights the significance of the absent mother trope in Gothic Fiction. She argues that the author of a Gothic text, which is both thrilling and unconventional, may feel threatened by the presence of a mother figure who seeks to impose societal norms and restrictions.<sup>2</sup> Given that the absent mother myth is a fundamental element of gothic literature, the reader is not entirely left to face the "absent mother" until her actions become evident. Consequently, it is necessary to eliminate Mrs. Tallis prior to the progression of the Gothic story. Over time, her focus on caring for her young child is somewhat shifted and she isolates herself in a quiet room to tackle the migraine attacks. Thus, she asserts her inability to assist Briony as follows:

*The Trials of Arabella. If she were not so ill, she would go up now and supervise or help, for it was too much for them, she knew. Illness had stopped her giving her children all a mother should. Sensing this, they had always called her by her first name.<sup>3</sup>*

Mrs. Tallis is aware of her inability to be a caring mother to her children, which is evident in the way her children address her. She is referred to by her given name instead of "mother" or "mum". In addition, she acknowledges that she is unable to properly care for Briony. Indeed, addressing her as Emily instead of 'Mother' signifies a shift or absence of her symbolic role. Furthermore, addressing their mother by her first name gives off a feeling of distance, as if they view her as separate from the traditional role of a motherly

1 Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 4.

2 Ruth Bienstock Anolik, *Property and Power in English Gothic Literature* (North Carolina: Publishers Box, 2016), 105.

3 McEwan, *Atonement*, 4.

figure. There are doubts surrounding the well-being of both the children and the mother. One could surmise that the children matured in the absence of their mother, a notion intricately linked to the concept of her nonexistence. Lacan's insights are crucial in providing an understanding of the pivotal role of basic lack in human subjectivity. This knowledge helps demonstrate Briony's construction of identity, which primarily consists of detached truth-seeking and a yearning for her mother's attention. The lack is an enduring state of not having something that has never been possessed and will never be owned, an indescribable feeling of absence that cannot be associated to any specific entity. Lacan aids in comprehending the state of absence, and it is proposed that this absence plays a crucial part in compelling us to maintain our desires. In essence, desire emerges when there is a sense of absence or lack, specifically the absence of a significant symbol known as the phallus. This symbol, which represents the birth of language and communication, cannot be located inside the Symbolic Order. However, if it were to be discovered, it may potentially guide the individual towards ultimate meaning. Briony, like the Lacanian subject, is devoid of the phallus and embarks on a journey throughout the book driven by her need to locate it.

In the realm of desire, the individual seeks to fulfil a deep longing for the mother's affection, symbolized by the phallus. However, this symbolic object is inherently absent within the framework of society. As a result, individuals seek out substitute objects, known as "object-petit-a," to fill this void.<sup>4</sup> Viewed through the lens of "object petit a," one could posit that Briony consciously redirected her literary ambitions as a means of capturing her mother's attention, revealing her underlying motive. In doing so, she positioned herself as the desired object of her mother. Briony is shown as a youngster who lacks her mother's attention due to her mother's recurring migraine episodes. As a result, Briony's writing serves as a means for her to seek validation from others. Mater-

nal absence significantly impacts the formation of the child protagonist's identity throughout the building stage. Briony is a fervent writer who lives in a realm of her own creation, caught in a delicate balance between the tangible and the fantastical. Put simply, her perception of the events is significantly different from reality, indicating a disconnect from the truth. She channels the emotions associated with the missing mother into her fictional work.

Winnicott's theory posits that one's identity is shaped by its intricate relationship with the mother's physical body and imagination. One must detach oneself from these depictions while still upholding a symbolic bond with them. Winnicott suggests that this connection allows the self to serve as a safe haven, a place to find comfort, relax, and establish a sense of reality.<sup>5</sup> Due to her inability to establish a strong emotional connection with her mother, Briony turned her focus towards writing, as advised by Uzun in her article: Briony communicates in order to discuss and come to an agreement over her mother's nonattendance. The absence mentioned is a significant feature of the Bildungsroman genre, since the growth of the protagonist depends on the separation between their own identity and the surrounding world... Therefore, it may be inferred that the work subtly emphasizes the lack of the mother as a catalyst for Briony's writing.<sup>6</sup> Her yearning for a maternal presence serves as the key driving force behind her inclination towards crafting works of fiction. Nevertheless, she produces a misguided work of fiction that is genuinely misleading. The protagonist experiences a state of confusion and uncertainty, caught between the realms of fantasy and reality. This causes distress and emotional turmoil for the other characters in the narrative. In his essay, Brian Finney provides a description of her. At the tender age of thirteen, Briony is already dedicated to pursuing a career as a writer. She unrelentingly prioritizes her own fictional universe above anything else the reality presents to her.<sup>7</sup> The absence of the mother blurs the barrier between dream and reality.

4 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VIII*, (ed.) Jacques-Alain Miller-Sylvana Tomaselli, çev. John Forrester (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 177.

5 D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1967).

6 G. Sabancı Uzun, "An Object Relations Perspective on Ian McEwan's *Atonement*: Briony's Creative Apperception in Light of Attachment Theory Genre and Narrative Form", *Trakya Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 20/1 (2018), 253-266.

7 Barbara Finney, "Ian McEwan", *California State University Long Beach* (Access Date: June 5 2024).

Within the narrative, it becomes evident that the protagonist is not the sole progeny of Emily. Cecilia, her elder daughter, and Leon, their son, both play important roles in the story. Nevertheless, her connection with Leon is less complex compared to her relationship with her children. Emily's behavior towards her oldest daughter Cecilia, whom she perceives as rebellious and non-compliant with Victorian ideals, differs from her approach towards Briony. Emily Tallis embodies the traits commonly associated with Victorian women. Like many women of her time, she adheres to the traditional values of the Victorian era. She believes that her eldest daughter, Cecilia, should marry and take on household responsibilities instead of pursuing higher education, which she dismissively refers to as 'Varsity.'<sup>8</sup> This reflects the societal expectations placed on women during that period. In a display of restraint, she harbors a quiet desire for Leon to introduce one of his companions to their home, as she envisions this guest as a potential match for Cecilia. Emily's words throughout the book offer insight into her perspective on her daughter. Despite perceiving her daughter as lacking employment or specific expertise, Emily recognizes the importance of finding a suitable husband and navigating the complexities of motherhood. The precise reason for her disdain for Cecilia is not revealed, but her manner of speaking offers clues about her perspective, which she imposed on women of similar age at that era. McEwan carefully observes that Cecilia's constant discussion of her experiences at Cambridge irritates her mother, while she does not feel any sense of envy. Contrary to popular belief, historical evidence presents a contrasting narrative. Despite Mrs. Tallis being physically gone, she is aware of Cecilia's condition and does not endorse it.

## 2. The Analysis of Asylum

Asylum, as a secondary reference, will be briefly examined within the framework of trauma theory, principally serving as a foundation for the examination of the toxic motherhood stereotype. By positioning Stella as the focal point of this discovery, one may argue that the character is portrayed as a person afflicted with a diverse and intricate array of mental

impairments. The significant disruption she experienced may be characterized as depression resulting from unmet emotional needs in her connection with Max, the psychiatrist. Nevertheless, her deficient etiquette in Victorian society often receives criticism, resulting in the denial of her emotional demands. She decides to get into a forbidden connection with Edgar, which results in the distressing experience of a parasitic relationship. She is immobilized by the inability to maintain a comfortable lifestyle while being trapped in a repetitive pattern of emotional devastation. As a result, she becomes disconnected from reality and becomes trapped in an inescapable sequence of events. Stella, in her roles as a mother and wife, is restricted by the constraints of her marriage. She is discontented and, during World War II, other women sought means to liberate themselves from their marital bonds. Stella's act of committing adultery with Edgar might be seen as a means of achieving liberty. As Sheila Rowbotham observes that the 1950s seemed to embody the typical decade, yet surprisingly it produced innovative rebels.<sup>9</sup>

Stella's rebellious behaviour manifests itself via her adulterous romance with Edgar, leading to a sequence of irreparable events that subject her parenthood to scrutiny. In other words, her rebellious behaviour might be seen as a destructive one, which is one of the denominators of the Gothic literature as previously said. Stella's act of flight might be seen as a departure from her duties as a mother. Her parenting is criticized within the confines of Victorian societal norms due to her failure to conform to the prescribed standards. Max wants Stella to fulfil the role of a respectable partner, and he articulates these statements with the intention of enlightening Charlie. Due to the lack of a strong mother-child attachment between Charlie and Stella, Charlie's pain is intensified. Establishing and nurturing a strong bond with the kid is a fundamental aspect of motherhood, since it allows the child to develop their sense of self within a reliable and secure connection. In "Child Care and the Growth of Love" (1953), Bowlby states that it is widely thought that a crucial factor for maintaining

<sup>8</sup> McEwan, *Atonement*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States* (New York: Viking, 1997), 281.

good mental health in infants and early children is the presence of a close, affectionate, and uninterrupted bond with their mother. This connection should provide both the kid and the mother with a sense of fulfilment and pleasure.<sup>10</sup> This remark implies that a kid's healthy growth may be attained by maintaining a balanced and nurturing connection with the child. One might see the argument from an alternative standpoint, which posits that if the mother fails to establish a visible presence in her connection with the kid, she may be regarded unsuccessful. Undoubtedly, Stella may be said to be an inadequate mother, since she exhibits the characteristics of a destructive or negligent mother in her interactions with Charlie. The concept of 'maternal deprivation,' as proposed by Bowlby, has had a significant role in shaping the connection between Charlie and Stella.<sup>11</sup> Within the narrative, Stella explicitly affirms that Charlie is the target of her ruinous and negligent disposition:

*Stella realized then that Charlie's unhappiness had locked him out of this community as effectively as hers had, and she felt a dull sense of confirmation, she felt she might have known, this is the nature of people, they unerringly select as their victim the one who most needs their warmth.*<sup>12</sup>

Max acknowledges that Stella's emotional detachment and relationship with Edgar have a detrimental effect on Charlie. Max emphasizes that Stella's inattentive and absent parenting is the primary cause of Charlie's misery. Regarding her propensity for causing harm and showing disregard:

*Max went to the window and stared out, his fingers clenching and unclenching in that familiar way. She saw that he could not tolerate this failure; the idea that Charlie was suffering because of his parents' collapsing marriage embarrassed him acutely.*<sup>13</sup>

Stella's sadness and the traumas caused by Edgar have been key factors in their child-mother connection. Stella indeed undergoes the last category, which is constriction. Herman proposes that when an individual feels utterly devoid of authority and all attempts to resist are ineffective, they may undergo a condition of surrender. The self-defense mechanism becomes completely inoperative. The vulnerable individual effectively emancipates herself from her situation not by physical intervention in the tangible realm, but rather by modifying her state of awareness.<sup>14</sup>

This phenomenon might be seen as emotional numbness, which serves as a kind of defense mechanism against potential painful experiences. Put simply, it refers to the act of separating emotions from actions and recollections. Herman (1997) highlights that detachment may be seen as a kind of protection from intense and unrelenting suffering, serving as a minor mercy provided by nature. (p.43). This method serves as a means of avoiding recollection of the incident by distancing oneself from the reminders, activities, and locations associated with it. Regarding Stella, it can be affirmed that she was emotionally affected while Charlie was in the pond. Despite Charlie being within sight range, Stella was unable to perceive him. Due to the horrors, she has had with Edgar, Stella becomes emotionally disconnected in an effort to avoid recollecting the occurrence. Unfortunately, this detachment leads to lasting effects for the family. Depressed women fulfil the physical and symbolic duties of motherhood, but they often exhibit withdrawal, detachment, and psychological and emotional absence.

### 3. The Analysis of Beloved

The third novel to be examined in the context of the destructive and absent mother archetype is *Beloved*. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a literary work that explores the themes of motherhood and the act of nurturing. The events in the story occur during the early

10 John Bowlby, "Some Causes of Mental-health", *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1953), 11.

11 Bowlby, *Some Causes of Mental-health*, 11.

12 Patrick McGrath, *Asylum* (UK: Penguin Random House, 1996), 180.

13 McGrath, *Asylum*, 178.

14 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 43.



1800s. The book describes the experiences of Sethe, an African American lady, from her enslavement in Kentucky until her residency in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873.<sup>15</sup> Sethe, despite her freedom, is imprisoned by haunting recollections of the traumatic experiences she had as a slave. These memories ultimately drive her to do the unthinkable crime of killing her own daughter. Subsequently, in the narrative, Beloved returns, causing Sethe's trauma to be activated. Nevertheless, the recurring pattern of trauma becomes evident as the maternal characters in the narrative have had their own traumas stemming from the lack of a mother figure. They were unable to sustain a wholesome maternal-filial bond. The work prominently features the archetype of a destructive and absent mother, which serves as a crucial recurring theme. The daughter's capacity to form a strong emotional connection, particularly with her own daughter, is adversely affected by the absence of her mother. In essence, the absence of the mother jeopardizes the perpetuation of this pattern.

In the novel *Beloved*, the theme of cyclical patterns is explored via the characters of Sethe, her mother, and her connection with her children Denver and Beloved. Sethe's mother had discarded all the offspring she had with the white crew, except for Sethe, whom she chose to retain for herself. Ultimately, Sethe's connection with her mother was thwarted by the institution of slavery. Sethe's mother was forcibly taken from Africa and sent to America. Consequently, the abrupt separation from her mother at the age of 12 would likely have had a significant impact on Sethe's psychological well-being and sense of self. Mayfield (2012) suggests that Sethe's self-construction started with the traumatic experience of seeing her mother's death and her subsequent relocation to a Kentucky plantation known as Sweet Home.<sup>16</sup> The level of emotional distance experienced between the mother and kid in Sethe's narrative was very distressing. Due to the terrible nature of her relationship with her mother, this trauma is passed on to subsequent generations. Terry Paul Caesar's article, "Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" states that

Sethe's attempt to elucidate the reason for her self-inflicted neck wound to Beloved stems from an inherited rage that has been passed down from previous generations of moms who were devoid of any authority over their children's existence and without any influence in their development.<sup>17</sup> Based on Caesar's quote, it may be argued that the mother and daughter interactions in *Beloved* are characterized by trauma, stemming from the lack of independence each generation has over their offspring. Due to their inability to cultivate a harmonious connection with their moms, they lacked the knowledge and skills necessary to foster a good bond with their own daughter. Due to the perpetuation of the cycle, moms in *Beloved* exhibit destructive or negligent behaviour.

### Conclusion

In summary, the analysis focused on the lack of mothers in the three novels. Rooted deeply in the Gothic tradition, these works depicted the familial traumas that arise from moms who are destructive, inattentive, or absent. Undoubtedly, the perils and psychological distress experienced by the protagonists were essential elements at the heart of Gothicism. Ultimately, the examination of these three contemporary novels - *Atonement*, *Asylum*, and *Beloved* - highlights the significant influence of the lack of a mother figure on the formation of one's sense of self. The lack of a maternal figure acts as a trigger for the storyline and greatly impacts the emotional and psychological development of the main characters. The Lacanian concept of "Lack" and the theories of trauma and attachment are used to examine how the absence of an object influences the characters' sense of themselves and the development of their identity. The novels portray the complex nature of mothers being absent and the psychological void that results from it. They highlight the significant impact that mother figures have on shaping one's own identity. Collectively, these literary works contribute to the continuing discourse on the importance of motherhood in literature and its influence on the formation of one's sense of self.

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15 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, Random House, Inc., 1987).

16 Sandra Mayfield, "Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: A Psychological Reading", *Journal of Scientific Psychology* (2012), 4.

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