Narcissistic Mothers in Modernist Literature

New Perspectives on Motherhood in the Works of D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Jean Rhys
Narcissistic mothers are an important motif in modernist literature. Tracing its appearance in the works of writers such as D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, this book questions the dichotomous image of either benevolent or suffocating mother, which has pervaded religion, art and literature for centuries. Instead of focusing on the mother-child dyad as characterized primarily by maternal domination and the child’s submission, Marie Géraldine Rademacher insists on the definitional nuances of the term »narcissism« and considers the political and socio-economic context of the time in shaping these women’s narcissistic behavior. The study thus inspires a more positive (re)reading of the protagonists.

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For further information:
www.transcript-verlag.de/en/978-3-8376-4966-6
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1 An Overview of Motherhood

INTRODUCTION

Women mother. In our society, as in most societies, women not only bear children. They also take primary responsibility for infant care, spend more time with infants and children than do men, and sustain primary emotional ties with infants. (Chodorow 1978: 3)

Over the years, research conducted on motherhood has unanimously underlined the determining role that mothers play in the child’s psychological and physical development. While psychoanalytic theories have been primarily concerned with the mother’s unconscious and her strong attachment to the child, feminist perspectives have pointed out the oppression that women undergo, first biologically during pregnancy, and then socially when they are confined to their mothering role. Women’s ability to bear children and the role they play in the child’s growth and wellbeing have supported the largely accepted discourse on motherhood, which often tends to reduce them to the social role of selfless, protective nurturers who find maternal satisfaction through childcare. Glorifying representations of mother figures, especially in art and religion, have widely spread and sustained these images of mother-
hood. Mothers have been and continue to be praised for their important contribution in maintaining cultural values, as well as promoting state ideologies. However, if they fail to conform to these social expectations, they are often condemned and viewed as ‘bad mothers’ or in some cases even as ‘deviant monsters’. Aware of these on-going debates surrounding the question of motherhood and the representation of mothers, this book examines under a new light the multi-faceted depiction of narcissistic mothers in Modernist literature, hence challenging the too often simplistic, dualistic mainstream conception of mothers as either devoted caretakers or selfishly neglectful parents. Even if ‘narcissism’ and ‘motherhood’ have often appeared incompatible and at times, also vigorously been attacked in previous work, as it implies women’s withdrawal from their role as mothers, as well as from society, their association is still possible and the outcome, though undoubtedly contentious, can be in some cases more productive than problematic. The issue of narcissism is certainly not new in literature. However, its association with mother figures offers an unusual lens to observe and analyse the representation of motherhood in Modernist novels, which as a matter of fact abound with examples of narcissistic mother figures. Indeed, the Modernist period itself can be qualified as essentially narcissistic, since it strongly focuses on the individual’s place in society, thereby striving to find “fresh ways of looking at man’s position and function in the universe” (Gillies/Mahood 2007: 2). In fact, the 20th century has witnessed an important evolution of the European novel. Michael Bell comments that this change can be explained by the fact that “over this period, the importance of the individual, in increasing contrast to that of the social order, continued to rise to the point where society might be valued in so far as it serves the fulfilment of the individual rather than the other way around” (M. Bell 2001: 184). Therefore, in reflecting upon the place that the individual has come to occupy in society, following major socio-political changes and the outbreak of the First World War, psychoanalysts, philosophers and sociologists, such as Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx have shown concern for the question of the rationality of the human mind, while the German
philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has stressed human’s “Machtgelüst” (Nietzsche 2017: 56) or ‘desire for power’. It is through an examination of the following major Modernist novels – David Herbert Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* (1913), James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and finally *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) by Jean Rhys – that these notions of increasing self-awareness, darker aspects of human nature and excessive self-love are best illustrated. These novels feature mother figures who display many elements of narcissism as defined in the ‘Diagnostic Criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder’ (DSM-III), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and are much more commonly used than the Freudian categories. It provides the standard features of specific mental disorders, in our case of ‘Narcissistic Personality Disorder’ (1980), which includes: “a grandiose sense of self-importance; preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; exhibitionism; cool indifference or rage, inferiority, shame, and emptiness; entitlement, exploitativeness, overidealization, or devaluation; and lack of empathy” (Morrison 1986: 2). Yet, these novels reveal that these women occasionally also show motherly concern for their offspring. They demonstrate that the picture is more complex than the crudely judgemental definition of ‘Narcissistic Personality Disorder’ would suggest and they show that narcissism and motherhood can and actually ‘do’ frequently co-exist without necessarily resulting in damaging effects on the child. Perhaps here, we can speak of benevolent narcissistic mothers, a concept which fundamentally challenges the ideal image of romantic motherhood and the myth of selfless mothers. From its very beginnings, psychoanalysis has used literature as a kind of empirical verification (e.g. Ernest Jones’ famous essay “Hamlet and Oedipus” or *Sons and Lovers*) and is now probably more influential in literary studies than clinical diagnosis. Jeffrey Berman points out the existence of an interconnection between the artist and the psychoanalyst, a link that has been established by Sigmund Freud himself in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916), in which he claims that the artist is “in rudiments an introvert, not far
removed from neurosis” and that he “desires to win honour, power, wealth, fame and the love of women; but he lacks the means for achieving these satisfactions” (Freud 1916: 375). Consequently, the artist will seek a substitute gratification through art, and according to Freud’s observation, there exists a major link between creativity and suffering. In the case of D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys, biographers have documented feelings of anxiety occasioned by the mother’s absence/death, leading to a state of mourning for the lost love-object as well as depression, and these issues clearly pervade their work. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the autobiographical elements permeating the four texts under scrutiny without, however, claiming to conduct a faithful psychoanalytical analysis of the authors’ actual mothers, although it is difficult not to refer to this context occasionally, for the richness of the text stems from the artist’s ability to draw inspiration from his/her environment and enhance it with creativity. Freud’s influence on Lawrence, Joyce, Woolf and Rhys is undeniable; by seeking to dismiss the traditional realist novel, which they felt was inadequate to capture the complexity of human existence, these Modernist writers choose to adopt new narrative techniques to represent the working of human subjectivity. Whether they explicitly admit it or not, they have to some extent, integrated either consciously or unconsciously the Freudian psychoanalytic perspective in their depiction of the meanders of a ‘troubled’ mind. Freud’s writings had a subsequent influence on literature as the poet W. H. Auden indications when he wrote of Freud that: “If often he was wrong, and, at times, absurd / to us he is no more a person / now but a whole climate of opinion / under which we conduct our different lives” (Auden 1976: 275). Jean Rhys’ Good Morning, Midnight represents, as Lilian Pizzichini observes, “a daring break with conventional narrative”, a novel which demands from its reader to “read the novel the way Sasha experiences life: fractured, bewildering, with a hint of menace” (Pizzichini 2009: 217). Rhys’ use of elliptical prose parallels James Joyce’s invitation to go beyond the words and silences in order to decipher his short stories, while D.H. Lawrence’s use of multiple narrative voices reflects
Freud’s conception of ‘mind’ that he regards as constituted of two distinct divided spaces, namely consciousness and subconsciousness. Rick Rylance supports this idea through his statement that *Sons and Lovers* is “concerned, very urgently with the relations of mind and body” (Rylance 2001: 27). This perception of the psyche is also illustrated in Woolf’s writing through the recurrent image of the mind as a container of thoughts, feelings and sensation, for instance in *To the Lighthouse* through the metaphorical allusion to “a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality” (Woolf 2006: 147). These innovative narrative techniques were certainly connected with the unprecedented social and political developments, culminating in the major upheaval occasioned by the Great War and later on the Second World War, which drove these writers to reflect upon the questions of human existence and conditions, thereby intersecting with Freud’s ideas of an individual’s sense of self. Even if the influence of Freud’s psychoanalytic theories on these writers has been recognized, this book, while informed by a Freudian theoretical reading, does not attempt to carry out an intellectual source study. Finally, besides the influence of psychoanalytic theories on Modernist literature, it is also essential to acknowledge the contribution of gender studies to the question of motherhood. Nancy Chodorow’s and Julia Kristeva’s work turns out to be inevitably influenced by psychoanalysis, hence emphasizing the existence of an interdependence between narcissism and the Oedipal narrative. Narcissistic mothers seem to sustain their sons’ Oedipal complex, through their excessive emotional attachment to their children, who in turn receive gratification from being adored and admired by the loved one. The selected Modernist novels contribute to exemplifying different forms of narcissism, by contrasting the image of self-absorbed mothers who eventually redirect their love onto their children, to the masculine attitude (mainly embodied through James Duffy in Joyce’s “A Painful Case” and Paul Morel in Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*), which remains focused on the ego. In Virginia Woolf’s and Jean Rhys’ narrative, the masculine form of narcissism becomes the expression of excessive self-interest and selfishness leading to a sense of grandiosity and superiority, which parallels
the launch of the two World Wars the 20th century has witnessed. Additionally, these novels demonstrate that while narcissism as a diagnosis of individuals may be problematic, it however works well as a model of collective consciousness.
2 Disentangling Notions

2.1 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS

Moving away from Gustave Flaubert’s model of ‘impersonality’, which insists on “the disappearance of the author from his work” (Conlon 1982:129) and advocates the unobtrusive subjectivity of the narrator in the story, these Modernist writers aspire to a much more fluid concept of life-writing by drawing from their personal experience. Indeed, Richard Ellmann, James Joyce’s biographer, once wrote that:

The life of an artist … differs from the lives of other persons in that its events are becoming artistic sources even as they command his present attention. Instead of allowing each day, pushed back by the next, to lapse into imprecise memory, he shapes again the experiences which have shaped him. He is at once the captive and the liberator. (Ellmann 1982: 3)

His observation suggests the existence of a strong interconnection between the writer’s life and his work and therefore calls for a brief reference to the autobiographical components present in the four Modernist novels examined in this book. When it comes to D.H. Lawrence, Harry Moore confirms that Lawrence himself underlines the closeness of life and art in Sons and Lovers, acknowledging that “towards the end of his life that the first half of the book was all autobiography” (Moore 1951: 94). On November 1910, as his mother was about to die,
D.H. Lawrence confessed in a letter to the Scottish poet, Rachel A. Taylor of his intense attachment to his mother, comparable to one between “great lovers” (Boulton 2002: 187) and recognizes that this strong affection has interfered with his relationships with other women, as well as with his father, Arthur Lawrence. The writer’s ambivalent feelings towards his father are clearly expressed through his realization of the latter’s “warmth” and “tenderness” (Worthen 1992: 59), while he expresses hatred for the man, he believed mistreated his mother. This led Joyce critics to focus on father-son (Ulysses-Telemachus) relationship, despite the fact that Stephen Dedalus is haunted by his mother’s ghost. Yet, his statement that “I was born hating my father” (Tedlock 1965: 14) implicitly indicates Lawrence’s awareness of Lydia’s influence on her son’s perception. This underlying internal conflict is reflected through his works, principally in *Sons and Lovers*. William Edward Hopkin agrees that “the greatest single influence in Lawrence’s life was his devotion to his mother” (Hopkin 1957: 23), who turns out to be a source of inspiration in his work. By writing *Sons and Lovers* and other mother poems, for instance “The Virgin Mother” (Lawrence 1994: 67) or “Monologue of a Mother” (Lawrence 1994: 14-15), Judith Farr notes that “the young Lawrence acknowledged his mother as muse, fostering his writing and painting” (Farr 1990: 195). Clearly, his novel has been inspired by his relationship with his mother. The autobiographical elements in the narrative are easy to identify: first, his relationship with his father was very much like Paul Morel’s, with phases of extreme aversion and hostility towards Walter Morel/Arthur Lawrence. Then, his deep love for his mother echoes Paul’s intense affection for Gertrude Morel. Lawrence himself sided with his mother; she was passionately fond of him; they clung to each other like lovers would. He cared about what his mother thought of him, both as a man and an artist, and tried his best to please her. Also, in October 1901, he lost his brother, William Ernest. Then, both Lawrence and his sister, Ada, took care of their mother on her death bed. The author experienced this as a traumatic event. He recalls:
Then in that year, for me everything collapsed, save the mystery of death, and the haunting of death in life. I was twenty-five, and from the death of my mother [9 December 1910], the world began to dissolve around me, beautiful, iridescent, but passing away substanceless. Till I almost dissolved away myself, and was very ill: when I was twenty-six. (Lawrence 1994: 623)

Later, Lawrence himself came to realize that *Sons and Lovers*, which mainly focuses on the bond between mother and sons, against the father and later the sons’ sweethearts, is based on a distorted truth, aiming at “mak[ing] Paul and his mother come out of it better than they should, at the expense of Miriam and his father” (Sagar 1989: 11), which Lawrence had not realized at the time he was writing the book. But with hindsight, Lawrence admitted he has been harsh on his father, who he saw mainly through his mother’s eyes and this accounts for the presence of multiple narrative voices in *Sons and Lovers*. Lawrence’s either conscious or unconscious ambivalent feelings towards his parents are revealed in his novel, through his use of a variety of narrative voices, which reflect his mixed intentions, for at times he nuances the portrayal of the drunk father with one of “a gentle soul, who marvelled at his child’s development in the world” (Spencer 1980: 40). Then, Paul Morel, who in spite of his excessive love for his mother, on many occasions, recognizes that she “bore him, loved him, kept him … so that he could not be free to go forward with his own life, really love another woman” (Lawrence 1992: 389).

If D.H. Lawrence’s works were influenced by his conflictual relationships with his mother, James Joyce also undoubtedly drew inspiration from distressing familial situations which obviously marked him throughout his life. The family in his work is often represented as a fragile unit, revolving around the mother and which could potentially collapse at any time. The Joyce family itself was constantly threatened with breaking apart, a condition worsened by the financial hardship they had to face. And for their social decline from comfortable middle-class status to genuine poverty, John Joyce was to be blamed. His chil-
dren hated him for his failure to fulfil his role of head of the household and provider for the family. This image of the father as withdrawn from his family duty and the picture of the tenacious mother appear recurrently in Joyce’s writing, for instance in *Dubliners*, and principally in the three short stories examined in chapter four. Also, along with family discord and the burden of financial insecurity, James Joyce experiences physical displacement caused by frequently moving from house to house. This prevented him from developing any attachment to a place in particular. It is in the year 1891 that the Joyce family experienced the harshness of the financial crisis, which resulted in them having to move out of their home in Bray (an upscale seaside resort in County Wicklow about ten miles south of the city) to a house in Carysfort Avenue on the south side, before a further removal to the north side of the river Liffey. The river, Terence Brown notes, “marked [...] a social divide between the indisputably respectable and the doubtfully so” (Brown 1992: xi). Therefore, Joyce who until then had enjoyed the pleasant neighbourhood of Bray became exposed to the poor dwellings, houses of ill-repute, lower-middle-class desperation and severe poverty of Dublin, hence discovering a new aspect of life in the city. However, Hélène Cixous explains, Joyce “became accustomed to insecurity, and probably profited from it in the form of experience to be used artistically; the difficulty of everyday life led him to the building of imaginary replacements” (Cixous 1972: 4). Besides the troubles occasioned by poverty, James Joyce was also confronted to the “underhand pressures exerted by the Church via the mother” (Cixous 1972: 7). In fact, Joyce uses the economic and social problems he encounters for the purpose of art. It is through his novels and mainly in his autobiographical book *Stephen Hero* that the reader is granted access to the personality hidden behind the writer’s pen. *Stephen Hero*, Gorman observes, serves as:

> a personal history … of the growth of mind, his [James Joyce’s] own mind, and his own intensive absorption in himself and what he had been and how he had grown out of the Jesuitical garden of
his youth. He endeavoured to see himself objectively, to assume a godlike poison of watchfulness over the small boy and youth he called Stephen and who was really himself. (Gorman 1941: 133)

In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce portrays Stephen Dedalus, a fictional alter ego of Joyce himself, as a rebellious son who despises his selfish father and disagrees with his mother’s blind religious faith. Both father and son were made responsible for May’s (Joyce’s mother) early death, the former for his cruelty, and the latter for his rejection of the Catholic faith. However, besides the prevailing tension between mother and son, Joyce did love and need her, erratically showing paralyzing emotional attachment to her. Cixous confirms that:

His [James Joyce] mother-fixation is clear: on the one hand he cannot do without her, he needs her to participate in his most private life, to obtain her approval; and on the other, he is always tenderly careful and solicitous, without going as far as self-sacrifice, in her interests. Filial and paternal in his attitude towards her, he cannot but associate her image in his mind with those of mourning, death, and Ireland in the guise of the “poor old woman” carrying milk who appears in “Telemachus”. The mother-fixation reveals an ambiguity of feelings, of simultaneous guilt and mistrust. (Cixous 1972: 22)

However, even if great tension existed between Joyce and his mother to the extent that he chooses to depict her as a hated haunting ghost in his novels, May’s letters to Joyce and the testimony of other family members demonstrate that she was devoted to him until her death and that he did passionately love her, profoundly suffering when she passed away. Mourning for his dead mother led Joyce to look for substitutes through his Aunt Josephine (towards whom he turned all his affection), Harriet Weaver (Joyce’s patron) and finally Nora Barnacle, who he eventually married in 1931. Joyce’s personal search for an adoptive
mother certainly inspired the shaping of his protagonists, for instance
Mr. Duffy in “A Painful Case”, whose love affair with an elderly
woman has the characteristics of a relationship between mother and
son. Indeed, Joyce used his personal affliction and experiences for the
purpose of art, and as Cixous points out, he used them in such a way
that “a private grievance of his may become relevant for everyman”
(Cixous 1972: xv).

As for Virginia Woolf’s novel To the Lighthouse, critics have
largely agreed on the autobiographical aspect of the text, which they
believe was written in the hope it “would modulate her obsessive pre-
occupation with her parents” (Panken 1987: 1), especially with her
mother, Julia Stephen by whom the character of Mrs. Ramsay was es-
essentially inspired. The depiction of the affectionate Mrs. Ramsay,
based on Virginia Woolf’s own memory of Julia Stephen, reflects her
admiration for her mother, who she loved with the intensity of an “un-
requited lover” (ibd.), but simultaneously who she remembered as be-
ing elusive while she lived. Then, when on May, 5th 1895 Julia Ste-
phen died after contracting rheumatic fever, she left behind a thirteen-
year-old daughter who experienced her mother’s death as “the greatest
disaster that could happen” (Woolf 1976: 40). Viviane Forrester ex-
plains that “dead or living, she [Julia] slipped away, became the very
essence of lack” and that in 1939, at the dawn of World War II, “Vir-
ginia was still searching for that perpetually lost mother” (Forrester
2015: 70). Besides Julia’s maternal withdrawal when she was still
alive, her tragic death was certainly devastating for the whole family
and proved to be the source of Woolf’s long-lasting grief. For many
years after her mother’s death and until she wrote To the Lighthouse, at
forty-four, “Virginia Woolf could not live – could not write, or act, or
She confessed that “the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could
hear her voice, see her imagine what she would do or say as I went my
day’s doings” (ibd.). However, despite her boundless affection for Julia
and her acknowledgment of her dedication to her children, Woolf
could not help seeing her mother critically. Describing her as “quick-
tempered”, “impetuous” or again “imperious” (Woolf 1976: 38-39), she stressed her mother’s austerity and condemned her disproportionate admiration for her husband’s achievement at the expense of her children, who felt neglected and ended up directing their anger toward their needy father. Woolf admitted: “we made him the type of all that we hated in our lives; he was the tyrant of inconceivable selfishness, who had replaced the beauty and merriment of the dead with ugliness and gloom” (Woolf 1976: 56). Ilona Bell confirms that “as a bereft and oppressed daughter, Woolf idealized her mother and abhorred her father” (I. Bell 1986: 153), but she knew that her image of both parents was often exaggerated. Therefore, if in To the Lighthouse, Woolf draws a portrait of a tyrannical father through the character of Mr. Ramsay, evidence from her letters, diaries and various written works shows that she still contradictorily retained a fascination with Leslie Stephen, who played an important part in shaping his daughter’s imagination through the education he gave her and through his own works. Lyndall Gordon points out, “near the end of her life she could still see her father from two angles at once: ‘As a child condemning; as a woman of 58 understanding – I should say tolerating’” (Gordon 1984: 17).

Woolf’s conflicting feelings for her father are best reflected through the portrait of Mr. Ramsay, who she depicts as tyrannical and demanding, but at the same time sentimental, as William Bankes’ memory of his old friend treasuring the sight of little chicks and exclaiming “Pretty-pretty” (Woolf 2009: 20) suggests. Also, the first part of To the Lighthouse, which ends on the harmonious image of the parents as they read together, emphasizes the intensity of their love for each other. Consequently, when his wife died, Leslie’s mental health rapidly deteriorated, for it was directly linked to his wife’s. He completely depended on her, constantly seeking comfort and encouragement from Julia and thinking of himself as a “skinless man” (Q. Bell 1973: 38) when deprived of her presence and her ministrations. He believed that “nothing was to touch him save her soothing and healing hand” (Woolf 1976: 80). Therefore, Quentin Bell remarks “essentially the happiness of the Stephen home derived from the fact that the children knew their
parents to be so deeply and happily in love” (Q. Bell 1973: 38). As a result, Julia’s death happened to change the family relationship as Woolf came to recognize in her novel, when she admits that the Stephen’s household was to be turned into “a house full of unrelated passions” (Woolf 2006: 123). If Leslie suffered from his wife’s absence, he was not the only one. Virginia Woolf, as many critics observed, “never fully released her ‘reservoir’ of pain” (Panken 1987: 11). She was unable to mourn her mother’s death and “her grieving process was [therefore] never completed” (ibd.) and it seems that in the loss of her mother the issues of identity and fusion are raised. For instance, Susan M. and Edward J. Kenney (1982) underlined Woolf’s inability to “move forward out of childhood”, while Strouse emphasized Woolf’s longing for “oneness with her mother” (Panken 1987: 11). Consequently, Woolf’s attempt to create an integrated identity and to finally solve her separation-individuation issues is best reflected in “the psychological or metaphorical substrate of her autobiographical writing, in letters, diary, and memoirs, as well as in her fiction” (Panken 1987: 13). However, not only does To the Lighthouse provide essential autobiographical insights, but it also endorses a cathartic function for the author, who admitted undergoing a feeling of liberation and transformation once she finished putting pen to paper. Woolf explains that “I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her” (Woolf 1976: 81). She admits that “I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion” (ibd.). Here, Woolf confesses that her novel has allowed her to mourn her mother, a process mainly mirrored through the narration of Mrs. Ramsay’s death. Woolf, who felt abandoned by her mother, illustrates first her frustration and indignation through the laconic and casual reference to Mrs. Ramsay’s abrupt death, announced in brackets, and which seems almost vengeful. At the same time her stylistic narratorial choice anticipates the possible resolution of the daughter’s conflict, for if at first we are tempted to understand her novel as being all about Mrs. Ramsay around whom the other characters seem to revolve, by
the end, it becomes clear that the novel is also about the resolution of Lily Briscoe’s (Mrs. Ramsay’s substitute daughter) mother issues as the completion of her painting seems to suggest. This idea is confirmed by Hermione Lee’s claim that *To the Lighthouse* “is above all about how the daughter can bring the mother back and let her go, can go beyond the pain and rage of her loss […] to the possibility of loving but not needing her” (Lee 1996: 80). Moreover, although Woolf’s memory of Talland House, in Cornwall where the Stephens have spent numerous holidays, has certainly inspired the description of the Ramsay’s summer home in the Hebrides, Woolf has chosen to set her novel in Scotland, a choice which possibly speaks for her desire to come to terms with some painful childhood memories.

Finally, Jean Rhys grew up with a feeling of being unwanted. She had the impression that she was only a poor substitute for her parents’ loss of their first child. Lilian Pizzichini remarks, “she [Jean Rhys] would carry this feeling of insubstantiality with her into adulthood” and that “as she grew, her mother’s inattentiveness and mournful demeanour had far-reaching effects” (Pizzichini 2009: 7). Still, Jean Rhys kept some pleasant, happy childhood memories, for instance enjoying the exclusive attention and affection of her parents. She remembered sitting “crowned, bursting with pride and importance, safe, protected, sitting in a large armchair, my father on one side, my mother on the other, my shiny shoes a long way off the ground” (Rhys 2016: 7). However, four months later Brenda, Jean’s younger sister was born and soon she felt everything changed. She believed, Lilian Pizzichini observes, that “her mother did not like her any more” (Pizzichini 2009: 16). This feeling is expressed through her heroine Julia in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, whose “mother had been the warm centre of the world … But suddenly she was ‘entirely wrapped up in the new baby’” (Rhys 1985: 294-295). Then, by the time she turns eight or nine, she became aware of some changes in her appearance, which left her with the feeling of being singled out from her siblings, for she was pale, thin and fair, while the others were all dark and sturdy. Since Minna, Rhys’ mother, was mainly preoccupied with the new baby, she had a nurse
named Meta hired to look after Jean, who remembers that Meta delighted in playing tricks on the child, threatening and frightening her. One vivid example occurred when aged seven or eight, Jean was called by the nurse to the kitchen, where she was awaiting the girl, wearing a carnival mask, talking in a high-pitched voice and suddenly sticking her tongue out of the mask. Rhys, recalling this grotesque situation, tells that “when I saw the long tongue protruding idiotically under the blank eyes, I went into a fit of hystericics and had to be put to bed and pacified by a handkerchief saturated with eau-de-cologne tied around my head” (Angier 1992: 12). It was certainly a traumatic episode of her childhood, which later on was featured in her novels. Up to this point, the mother figures in Rhys’ life have failed in providing the ministrations and affection the child longed for. Not only did she feel neglected, but her jealousy for Brenda led Jean to adopt a defiant and rebellious attitude as a statement of her pride, which slowly also turned out to be the expression of Rhys’ own self-punishment. This is best represented through the incident of the two dolls, a dark one and a fair one, which arrived from England. She recollects strongly desiring the former “as I have never wanted anything in my life before” (Rhys 2006: 23) but her little sister wanted the dark one too, and eventually her mother made Rhys give it to Brenda. Jean remembered: “I laid the fair doll down. Her eyes were shut. Then I searched for a big stone, brought it down with all my force on her face and heard the smashing sound with delight” (Rhys 2006: 23-24). Her action of savagely destroying the toy reveals her desire “to destroy her ‘fair’, her outcast self”, just like her heroine Antoinette in Wide Sargasso Sea destroys herself and feels a similar exultation, for it constitutes “a revenge on the rejecting world, and an escape from loneliness and madness” (Angier 1992: 15). At the same time, her act was also “an act of rebellion against her mother” (Pizzichini 2009: 31-32), who used to play the role of censor, and constantly reprimanded her, disapproved of her and tried to turn her into someone she was not. Later, Mina Rees Williams will inspire the mother figures in Rhys’ novels, for instance in Wide Sargasso Sea, where the mother only desires her son and pushes her
daughter away, ordering her to leave her alone. Then in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Lise is terrified of her mother for “when she was a little girl her mother beat her. For anything, for nothing” (Rhys 2000: 112). If these childhood episodes and her relationship with her mother have influenced Rhys’ novels, when she writes about motherhood she also draws from her own experience. When she was in England, she experienced living a life as a demimondaine. She became the mistress of a wealthy stockbroker Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith, who she madly loved and who remained an occasional source of financial help to Rhys even after he ended their relationship. She had many love affairs and experienced the joy of pregnancy and motherhood in all its aspects, for instance when she had to go through an almost fatal and disheartening abortion. Then later, she lost her son William Owen as he was only three weeks old. She also experienced the pain of being deprived of her daughter Maryvonne following her separation from her husband John Lenglet. The death of her newborn child constituted a traumatic episode in the writer’s life, an incident which she recounts for instance in *Good Morning, Midnight* and was without doubt the grief of her life, which she felt partly responsible for. Therefore, confronted by the challenges of maternity/motherhood from different angles, Jean Rhys was able to draw from her previous experiences and thus, provided a vivid, powerful portrayal of mother figures in her novels. Lilian Pizzichini confirms that Jean Rhys “would write about men and women and mothers and daughters for the rest of her life; about loss, the fear of loss and the inability to recover from loss because there is nothing that will compensate for what is gone” (Pizzichini 2009: 44). Surely, much of *Good Morning, Midnight* is inspired by her life in Paris, her painful marriage, her son’s death and the multiple encounters she made. Yet, if the presence of autobiographical elements in these four Modernist novels should be acknowledged, it is important to keep in mind that these narratives were equally inspired by the writers’ brilliant imagination and personal interpretation, and that these texts can also be read in the light of Sigmund Freud’s psychanalytic theories on
narcissism as well as Ovid’s myth of Narcissus, which is prior to and in many ways more complex than the clinical diagnosis.

2.2 THE ORIGINS OF NARCISSISM

Lay like a marble statue staring down.
He gazes at his eyes, twin constellations,
[…]
Himself he longs for, longs unwittingly,
Praising is praised, desiring is desired,
And love he kindles while with love he burns.
How often in vain he kissed the cheating pool
And in the water sank his arms to clasp
The neck he saw, but could not clasp himself!
Not knowing what he sees, he adores the sight;
That false face fools and fuels his delight.
(B. Bloom 1990: 51)

The myth of Narcissus has pervaded literature for centuries, through endless retellings and adaptations. Commonly known as the story of a beautiful, self-absorbed, young man who fell deeply in love with his reflection in the water, the legend of Narcissus became the symbol for a sterile, self-centred love that results in a tragic death. However, Ovid’s character reveals himself to be more than just a popular literary figure; he also turns out to provide a fertile ground for psychoanalytical interpretations, mainly a pre-Oedipal reading of the myth, focusing essentially on the child’s desire to recover a lost maternal love and his quest for identity. It is important to mention that Narcissus’ birth was the result of the rape of the water-lady, Liriope by Cephisus, who in his action almost drowned her in the stream. When taking a close look at Narcissus’ fate, a parallelism can be established between his attraction to water and his mother’s near drowning. Critics such as Hyman Spotnitz and Philip Resnikoff interpret Narcissus’ obsessive gazing at the
water as an expression of his intense longing for the maternal body: “Narcissus by identification with Cephisus was predestined also to seek the love object in water. Hence, part of the fascination exerted on Narcissus by the image he saw reflected in the pool stemmed from his incestuous strivings, i.e. his yearning for his mother” (Berman 1990: 6). Therefore, Narcissus’ quest for identity and self-esteem urges him to look for maternal mirroring and validation from external objects. However, at the same time as he seeks maternal love, as shown by his attitude towards Echo, the mountain nymph who fell in love with him, Narcissus’ vehement rejection “Hand off! Embrace me not!” repeats his mother’s traumatic sexual union with Cephisus who we are told “embraced” and “ravished” Liriope in a winding brook. Berman suggests that Narcissus “seems to be projecting onto Echo an image of an assaultive, smothering mother whose touch threatens to absorb or devour his identity” (Berman 1990: 7). Narcissus embodies a son’s ambivalence towards the maternal figure that he fears but at the same time desires. Berman observes that both overloved and underloved, Narcissus in turn becomes overloving and underloving and that these “typical narcissistic problems, often arise from parents who are alternately overinvolved and underinvolved with their children” (ibid.). He further explains that “overloving parents tend to be possessive, anxiously protective, and infantilizing; hence they prevent their children from achieving autonomy and independence” (ibid.). Additionally, in the case of Narcissus, the presence of the pre-Oedipal father, who plays a decisive part in the infant’s separation from the mother is negated, hence further accounting for the son’s inability to individuate from the symbiotic mother. In fact, the tragic story of Narcissus has proven to possess psychological complexity, which inspired clinical research on the issue of narcissism. This resulted in the awareness that narcissism could in some cases be a personality disorder. As a result, Freudian concepts have tended to be regarded increasingly sceptically in the recent decades, but a leap back to the mythic tradition of ‘Echo and Narcissus’, which dramatizes the issue of self-love and self-absorption, also demonstrates strongly positive elements and hence resists any sim-
ple reduction of ‘narcissism’ to a pathological condition. A more optimistic reading of the myth suggests that Narcissus’ attraction to his reflection in the water could indicate his wish to reunite his two complementary halves, thereby, it addresses the problem of identification and reunification. Read in the light of Plato’s ideals of self-knowledge, the text embodies the idea that knowledge of the soul can only be reached through *eros* (or love). In his *Symposium*, Plato describes the process of gaining self-knowledge through the mirrored sight. He compares the eye to a mirror and concludes that “the lover, looking into the best part of the eyes of the beloved, sees the best part of himself reflected there” (Boulding 2013: 3). Consequently, the individual has access to self-knowledge through enhancing one’s self-esteem, primarily “through seeing the most beautiful and divine part of one’s soul mirrored in a lover’s eyes” (Boulding 2013: 9). Plato’s reading of Narcissus is centered on productive love and fertility, for “love wants to possess the good forever” (Plato 1989: 54), which goes hand in hand with “giving birth in beauty” (Plato 1989: 53). Kaitlyn Boulding points out that “reproduction is the closest that mortals get to immortality. The lover wants his children, birthed ideas, and self to become beautiful” (Boulding 2013: 9). Therefore, according to Plato’s ideals, self-knowledge arises from falling in love with the most beautiful and divine part of one’s self as reflected in the eyes of the lover, which is revealed to positively impact on the individual’s self-esteem, leading him or her to seek immortality as the reincarnation of Narcissus into a flower suggests. Interpretations of the myth are endless as well as contradictory. Ovid’s myth of Echo and Narcissus does not represent self-love strictly as unfavourable, but it also seems to acknowledge the moment of self-recognition through self-valuation as positive and necessary in an individual’s development. This aspect is further explored in psychoanalysis mainly through Sigmund Freud’s work on narcissism.
2.3 FREUDIAN THEORY

In 1898, Havelock Ellis was the first to draw a connection between the figure of Narcissus and the term ‘narcissism’. It is in his paper entitled “Auto-Erotism: A Psychological Study”, that he uses the term of ‘Narcissus-like tendency’ to designate an extreme form of autoeroticism, defined as a tendency “to cover all the spontaneous manifestations of the sexual impulse in the absence of a definite outer object to evoke them” (Ellis 1942: 362). A year later, in 1899, the German psychiatrist Paul Näcke chose the term ‘narcissism’ to refer to a sexual attitude in which “a person treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated—who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities” (Freud 2013: 3). For Näcke, the term ‘narcissism’ came to describe a sexual perversion. But it is in 1914 that the concept was significantly elaborated by Sigmund Freud in his essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction” which continues to this day to be considered as a landmark contribution to the work of psychoanalysis. Freud observes that the narcissistic attitude is found in many individuals who suffer from other disorders. Freud came to the conclusion that narcissism might be present more commonly and even play a major role in human sexual development. Accordingly, he argues that “narcissism in this sense would not be a perversion, but the libidinal complement of the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature” (Freud 2013: 2). Here, Freud suggests the existence of a primary and ‘normal’ narcissism (as he puts it himself), a concept which arises from his work with patients who suffer from schizophrenia and dementia praecox, and who display these two main features: megalomania and withdrawal of their own interest from people and things of the external world. In that case, Freud explains “the libido that has been withdrawn from the external world has been redirected to the ego and thus gives rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism” (Freud 2013: 5). From his conclusion, it is essential to note Freud’s distinction between two types
of libido, namely ‘ego-libido’ (self) and ‘object-libido’ (people and things in the external world). Freud claims that “the more of the one is employed, the more the other become depleted” and that “the highest phase of development of which object-libido is capable is seen in the state of being in love, when the subject seems to give up his own personality in favour of an object-cathexis” (Freud 2013: 6). However, in the case of a person who is afflicted by pain and discomfort, the individual will most likely withdraw his interest from the external world as long as it is not concerned with his suffering. To illustrate this idea, Freud refers to the German poet Wilhelm Busch who describes the state of a poet suffering from a toothache. He writes “concentrate is his soul / in his molar’s narrow hole” (Freud 2013: 15). Freud observes that “libido and ego-interest share the same fate and are once more indistinguishable from each other. The familiar egoism of the sick person covers both” (ibd.). As long as he is in pain, the poet redirects his ‘libidinal cathexes’ on his own ego, and later on, once he has recovered, switches back to external objects. Then questioning what makes it necessary to go beyond the limits of narcissism and redirect our libido to objects, Freud on the one hand acknowledges strong egoism as a means for self-preservation, a protection against falling ill. However, on the other hand, he recognizes, at last, the importance to “begin to love in order not to fall ill” and he believes that the individual is likely to become ill if, “in consequence of frustration, he is unable to love” (Freud 2013: 20). Here, Freud’s thoughts appear to be contradictory. While on the one hand he is convinced that withdrawing the libido from the external world and redirecting it on the ego can be seen as a regression from true object relationship, (which he defines as ‘secondary narcissism’), on the other hand he also seems to recognize that it can be seen as a means for self-preservation. As a result, it is difficult to conceive ‘secondary narcissism’ in strictly negative terms. Yet, Freud points out that in a love-relationship not being loved lowers one’s self-esteem, while being loved raises it, hence once again “the aim and the satisfaction in a narcissistic object-choice is to be loved” (Freud 2013: 37-38). He further explains that a person in love is hum-
ble, because a person who loves, has given up a part of his narcissism and it can only be replaced by being loved in return. He was convinced that in order for the ego to develop, the individual has to depart from primary narcissism, by displacing the libido on to an ego ideal. He states that:

Loving in itself, in so far as it involves longing and deprivation, lowers self-regard; whereas being loved, having one’s love returned, and possessing the loved object raises it once more. When libido is repressed, the erotic cathexis is felt as a severe depletion of the ego, the satisfaction of love is impossible, and the re-enrichment of the ego can be effected only by a withdrawal of libido from its objects. The return of the object-libido to the ego and its transformation into narcissism represents, as it were, a happy love once more; and, on the other hand, it is also true that a real happy love corresponds to the primal condition in which object-libido and ego-libido cannot be distinguished. (Freud 2013: 39-40)

Yet, in his study on narcissism, Freud proposes that another way to approach this issue is by observing the erotic life of human beings, namely through the object-choice of infants and growing children. He assumes that narcissism exists as early as the infant has a vague awareness of himself. From the beginning, he recognizes the importance of the mother in a child’s ‘optimal development’ when he states that a child has two sexual objects, himself and the woman who nurses him, therefore postulating a primary narcissism in everyone. His idea of ‘optimal development’ remains problematic as it easily slides into censorious judgement on failed individuation. He claims that the choice of the mother or substitute mother as a child’s primary love object derives from the fact that “the first auto-erotic sexual satisfactions are experienced in connection with vital functions which serve the purpose of self-preservation” (Freud 2013: 22), therefore a child becomes firstly attached to the person who is responsible for his or her feeding, care,
and protection. This type of object-choice relationship has been identified as the ‘anaclitic’ or ‘attachment’ type. Meanwhile, he came across a second type, that of individuals whose libidinal development has been subjected to some disturbance, such as ‘perverts and homosexuals’ (these terms were employed as it is by Freud himself in his essay and would nowadays be widely challenged). He observes that these individuals seek their own self as love-object instead of a love-object modelled after their mother. These people, Freud states “are exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed ‘narcissistic’” (Freud 2013: 22). In the Freudian perspective, primary narcissism is “a positive, libidinal feeling toward the self”, and not a perversion. He regards the abandoning of one’s primary narcissism and self-love for external love objects as an essential step in the development of the ego, even though he remains vague on when this phase is supposed to take place. Comparing male and female sexes, Freud concludes that “there are fundamental differences between them in respect of their type of object-choice, although these differences are of course not universal” (Freud 2013: 23). Freud notes that object-love of the ‘attachment’ type or ‘anaclitic’ type is mainly characteristic of the male; while women, especially if they are good-looking “develop a certain self-contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed upon them in their choice of object” (Freud 2013: 25). These women tend to love themselves with an intensity similar to that of the man’s love for them. That being said, it is important to mention that Freud does not completely exclude the possibility that some women could love according to the ‘anaclitic’ type or what he also calls the ‘masculine type’. And in the case of narcissistic women who remain indifferent towards men, Freud claims that “in the child which they bear, a part of their own body confronts them like an extraneous object, to which, starting out from their narcissism, they can then give complete object-love” (Freud 2013: 26). Additionally, he acknowledges the case of other women who do not have to wait to become mothers to give complete object-love. These women, even before puberty, feel masculine and
develop accordingly along masculine lines. In a nutshell, Freud summarizes his approach to an individual’s object-choice as follows:

A person may love: ——

(1) According to the narcissistic type:
   a. what he himself is (i.e. himself)
   b. what he himself was,
   c. what he himself would like to be,
   d. someone who was once part of himself.

(2) According to the anaclitic (attachment) type:
   a. the woman who feeds him,
   b. the man who protects him. (Freud 2013: 27)

Although Freud establishes these two groups, he insists that human beings cannot be distinctly divided into those two categories and that both kinds of object-choice are open to each individual, even if he might show a tendency for one more than the other, therefore these categories immediately becomes blurred and confusing. Freud does not only consider the primary narcissism of children but he also examines the attitude of devoted, loving parents towards their children and concludes that “it is the revival and reproduction of their own narcissism, which they have long since abandoned” (Freud 2013: 27). In that case, parents tend to overvalue their offspring, who becomes the centre of the parents’ life and are highly considered as “His Majesty the Baby” to use Freud’s own term. He explains that the child is expected “to fulfil those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out – the boy shall become a great man and a hero in his father’s place, and the girl shall marry a prince as a tardy compensation for her mother”, and hence, ensure the “immortality of the ego…by taking refuge in the child” (Freud 2013: 28). Freud concludes by stating that “parental love, which is so moving and at the bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents’ narcissism born again, which, transformed into object-love, unmistakably reveals its former nature” (ibd.). Even if he acknowled-
es the importance of primary narcissism in a child’s psychological development, he does not address the issue of the disturbances to which a child’s original narcissism is exposed; neither does he discuss the defense mechanism the child uses to protect himself from them. Visibly, psychoanalysts unanimously agree on the important contribution of mothers in the infant’s physiological and psychological development. Therefore, it is essential to consider the feminist and sociological approach to this issue, which enhances the insight on the representations of motherhood.

2.4 SOCIOLOGICAL AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

In her influential book *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow further confirms the important function of ‘good mothering’, which consists in the mother’s ability to make “total environmental provision” (Chodorow 1978: 83) for her infant, that is providing maternal care which will enable her child to deal with his/her anxiety, as well as to cope with his/her environment. Chodorow warns of the consequences that might arise if the mother fails to serve either as an external ego, which then forces the infant to develop prematurely an adaptive ego or on the contrary, if she serves as an adaptive ego for too long. She explains that in these cases “the infant is prevented from developing capacities to deal with anxiety” (ibd.). She emphasizes how crucial it is to differentiate from the mother as well as the other way around and describes the role that a ‘good enough mother’ plays in the child’s development as follows:

She needs to know both when her child is ready to distance itself and to initiate demands for care, and when it is feeling unable to be distant or separate. This transition can be very difficult because children at this early stage may one minute sense themselves merged with the mother (and require complete anticipatory under-
standing of their needs), and the next, experience themselves as separate and her as dangerous (if she knows their needs in advance). The mother is caught between engaging in “maternal overprotection” (maintaining primary identification and total dependence too long) and engaging in “maternal deprivation” (making premature demands on her infant’s instrumentality). (Chodorow 1978: 84)

While in her book, Chodorow seems at first to advocate a change in the sexual division of labour by asking that fathers participate more actively in child rearing, the above passage contradicts her initial intentions by conservatively placing a stringent demand on mothers. Additionally, she remains vague about when this individuation is supposed to take place, although she is convinced of the negative consequences that a prolonged bond between mother and child might entail. Yet, the difficulty that mothers undergo when it comes to separating from their infant stems from their experiencing the child as an extension of themselves. They experience satisfaction from caring for an infant and demonstrate maternal empathy, which derived from total identification with it (see Chodorow 1978: 85). Since mothers consider their child as part of themselves, and strongly empathize with them, they experience the infant’s gratification as self-gratification, hence, reciprocating primary love. Chodorow’s work is significant in the exploration of the representations of motherhood because in her studies, she considers both the case of infant girls and boys, comparing and contrasting distinctively their relationship with the mother. Because of her lack of empirical evidence to support her hypothesis, Chodorow is forced to base her arguments on object-relation’s assumptions to argue that mothers treat daughters differently from sons, which leads mothers to identify with daughters for a longer period of time. She believes that it is through this longer period of identification that daughters develop their relational capacity, which prepares them in turn to become mothers. Therefore, she maintains that this early identification with the mother shapes the difference between masculine and feminine identity,
thus perpetuating traditional social roles. Originally, Freud saw oedipal complexes in both genders as completely symmetrical. The boy’s oedipal complex consists in his attachment to the mother, an attachment that bears sexual overtones. In this dynamic, the son enters into a triangular conflict, in which the father is seen as a threat, a rival for the mother’s love. Accordingly, the son wishes to possess the mother and replace the father. At the same time, he fears castration by his father, hence undergoing a dilemma between his self-love, which results in his narcissistic interest in his penis, and his incestuous love for the mother. As a resolution of his Oedipus complex, the male infant is expected to repress and detach his heterosexual love from his mother and identify with his father, who embodies “the superiority of masculine identification and prerogatives over feminine” (Chodorow 1978: 94). In the case of little girls, at around the age of three, they discover that they have no penis, making them think that they are castrated. They experience their lack as a “narcissistic wound”, which is a blow to their self-esteem. Thus, they develop contempt for their mother, who they hold accountable for the missing genital. They seek the penis through their relationship with their father and turn out to hate their mother who they see as a rival, since she has sexual access to the father. When the daughter experiences the mother as a rival and the father as a love object, we talk about the female Oedipus complex, which is “symmetrically opposed to the male Oedipus complex” (Chodorow 1978: 94), but as Chodorow mentions, “heterosexual orientation is thus an oedipal outcome for girls as well as for boys” (Chodorow 1978: 94-95). According to Freud, what mainly differs in a girl’s preoedipal relationship with her mother from a boy’s is that a girl’s phase is much longer than the one of a boy. Both remain attached to the mother sexually but “a boy’s relation to his mother soon becomes focused on competitive issues of possession and phallic-sexual oppositeness (or complementarity) to her” (Chodorow 1978: 96). The relation develops into a triangular conflict as a boy considers his father as a rival. A girl, by contrast, remains absorbed for a long time with her mother alone and completely neglects her father. Clearly, there exist differences between the pre-
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Oedipal mother-daughter and mother-son relationship. Those differences, as the physician and psychoanalyst Robert Fliess demonstrates, can be at best observed through case analysis. In his study, Fliess considers the most recurrent examples of psychopathological extreme and shows that mothers tend to inflict their pathology primarily on daughters. However, he explains that this disparity in the results accounts for the fact that “the picture is more easily recognizable in the female because of the naturally longer duration of the preoedipal phase” (Fliess 1970: 49). In his observations, he considers mothers who were at first ‘asymbiotic’ during the time their child needed symbiosis and who later became ‘hypersymbiotic’ when their daughters started to separate themselves from their mothers both mentally and physically. These mothers deny their daughters the individuation they seek and instead treat them as both physical and mental narcissistic extensions of themselves, controlling and using their daughters’ sexuality for their own gratification. These mothers engage in what Fliess calls “transitivism of the psychotic” or “I am you and you are me” (Fliess 1970: 48). This results in daughters often reproducing their mothers’ psychotic symptoms and their difficulty in developing an individual self. Nonetheless, even if fusion and narcissistic overidentification are predominantly characteristics of mother-daughter relationships, problematic mother-son relationships also exist, but of a different sort. While mothers tend to see their daughters as an extension of their self, boys are experienced as the ‘other’, even in their symbiotic phase with the mother. Psychoanalysts recognize the social component that shapes the early mother-son relationship. Chodorow explains that “the decline of the husband’s presence in the home” has resulted in a wife “as much in need of a husband as the son is of a father”, which bears the consequences that “the wife is likely to turn her affection and interest to the next obvious male – her son – and to become particularly seductive toward him” (Chodorow 1978: 104). Again, in such a case, the son is experienced as a sexual other by the mother. The low profile or absence of the father in the household prevents him from countering his wife’s seductive behaviour or his son’s burgeoning incestuous desires.
In this dynamic, the son depends on the mother “for a sense of self-sufficiency and self-esteem”, at the same time “it emphasized these sons’ sexuality and sexual difference and encouraged participation in a heavily sexualized relationship in boys who had not resolved early issues of individuation and the establishment of ego boundaries” (Chodorow 1978: 105). In a nutshell, a mother who seeks to fulfil her unmet erotic and emotional needs through her son will treat him as a sexual object, hence reciprocating his incestuous desires and sustaining his infantile dependence. And in the case of the mother-daughter dyad, mothers tend to remain emotionally bound to their daughters, who are experienced as the mothers’ double. These daughters eventually develop a poorly individuated sense of self and act as if they are still one with their mother. To Chodorow’s examination of the ‘good enough mother’, Julia Kristeva’s work offers an alternative lens to approach the issue of mother-child’s individuation, mainly by putting more emphasis on the child’s responsibility, rather than the mother’s in coming to terms with his/her attachment. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva argues that “matricide is a vital necessity” (Kristeva 1989: 27) in order for the child to grow out of their symbiotic relationship. While she underlines the need for both men and women to murder the mother, she nonetheless stresses that women find it extremely strenuous to come to term with their attachment, for they suffer from what Kristeva designates as “the dead mother complex”, reflected through melancholia and depression. However, the child’s necessity to symbolically kill the mother in order to grow into an ‘independent’ individual is subject to controversy and certainly needs to be questioned. While Chodorow seems to offer a more favourable picture of mother-daughter relationships, Kristeva in *Black Sun* appears to suggest a bleaker view of the mother-daughter dyad by providing numerous examples of pathogenic relationships. She insists on the mother’s obsessive control over her daughter’s subjectivity, which often results in hindering the daughter’s use of language as well as her ability to feel. For example, while analysing the French writer Marguerite Duras’ writing, Kristeva concludes that images of doubles pervade her work and embody her melancholia. She believes
that neither Duras nor her characters succeed in completely freeing themselves from the mother’s strong hold. Instead, they turn out to experience a state of affliction from which they never seem to recover. Finally, both Chodorow and Kristeva’s work, which draw from object-relations discourse, certainly acknowledge the important role of mothers in the child’s development. Yet, they seem to overlook or barely consider the socio-economic, as well as the political condition of women in their analysis, an essential component in the examination of the issue of narcissistic mothers in Modernist literature as the interpretation of the four novels underlines.

2.5 NARCISSISTIC MOTHERS IN MODERNIST NOVELS

Differences between mother-daughter and mother-son relationships exist and need to be considered when examining the question of narcissistic mothers. Accordingly, the novels considered in this book provide both examples of mother-daughter and mother-son relationship. The third chapter of this book focuses on D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* (1913), which as the title already indicates, gives an insight into the mother-son relationship. Thus, it concentrates on the character of Gertrude Morel, a narcissistic mother, who undeniably manifests traces of excessive love for her sons William and Paul, preventing them from having a healthy relationship with their father or other women. Even if she shows signs of extreme possessiveness and selfishness, she turns out to be a woman of vision. This constitutes a striking revisionist version of her character. Although she clearly displays signs of narcissism, she still proves to show concern for her sons’ happiness. Her incestuous-like love for her son Paul, to some extent, seems to trigger his artistic and creative talents. The ambiguous end of the novel is particularly revealing, as it points at a possible Oedipus complex resolution and the development of Paul as an artist, for as Freud claims: “creativity and suffering are mysteriously allied” (Berman 1990: 37). The
fourth chapter examines the mother figures in James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914). It mainly concentrates on the following short stories: “A Boarding House”, “A Mother” and “A Painful Case”. In these short stories, Joyce depicts mothers who try to live out their dreams through their daughters but end up being victims of their own ambitions. Joyce invites the reader to consider the social and economic conditions of the time when engaging with these mother figures, hence arousing sympathy for these women, whose narcissism is revealed to be fed and sustained by these factors. Chapter five offers an analysis of Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* (1937) which provides both a representation of mother-daughter and mother-son relationships. Mrs. Ramsay is a narcissistic mother who is in constant need for recognition either from her family or guests for her good deeds and her performance as the perfect hostess and as ideal mother. Many critics have disagreed on whether Mrs. Ramsay should be condemned or praised. This ambivalent attitude stems from Woolf’s intention to disrupt the myth of the ‘benevolent, selfless mother’. A close reading of this novel shows that this mother’s narcissism does not necessarily hinder her maternal ministrations: she is still capable of loving and caring for her children. Her coolness and aloofness, which have been often criticized, are revealed to enable the child’s separation from the mother. In this chapter, the relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and James, and the intimacy between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe are the centre of attention. Even though Lily is not Mrs. Ramsay’s biological child, the connection existing between these two women is very much reminiscent of one between mother and daughter. The key to the examination of Mrs. Ramsay is to be found in Lily’s painting. This new reading of the purple triangle discloses Lily’s mother issues, in which Mrs. Ramsay becomes the element that contributes to the resolution of the artist’s mother-daughter conflict. Finally, Woolf was concerned with the issue of narcissism in connection with violence occasioned by the Great War, suggesting that when narcissism is associated to an excessive sense of ego, the outcome can be fatal. If in this chapter, it is essentially about the violence of World War I, it is nonetheless important to briefly mention
the postcolonial readings previously conducted on *To the Lighthouse*. Janet Winston points out that the novel seems to consider “Mr. Ramsay and men and his generation and social class” as responsible for “upholding the world – literally running England and her colonies” (Winston 2009: 68). Thereby, it denounces British imperialism in the world. This issue is reminiscent of Joyce’s critique of the Irish case, which resonates through Woolf’s character, Mrs. McNab, an Irish working-class woman. She is essential to the writer’s critique of what Winston calls “the sustaining colonialism that underpins the English middle-class Victorian family” (Winston 2009: 90). *To the Lighthouse* not only mirrors Woolf’s political preoccupations with women’s rights, but also the damages of war, imperialism and fascism. Finally, chapter six examines the character of the narcissistic Sasha Jansen from Jean Rhys’ novel *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). Through Sasha, Rhys investigates the role that the mother’s ministrations play in the development of the narcissistic self, as well as the consequences it entails on the mother-child relationship. This mother figure is different from the ones in the novels previously examined. The reference to Sasha as a mother is very brief and occurs mainly during her experiencing childbirth, followed by the immediate death of her newborn. Although this episode is succinctly narrated, this scene remains nonetheless highly significant. The child’s death should be read as a disruptive element which contributed to Sasha’s narcissistic injury, hence reinforcing Sasha’s obsession and dependence on commodities, as a way to compensate and mourn the loss of her son. Through her representation of motherhood, Rhys explores how Modernist society encourages and sustains women’s narcissistic needs, thus leading them to take actively part in mass consumption. Yet, the novel offers a positive valuation of consumerism, by underlining the liberating aspect of make-up, fashion and alcohol for Sasha, who turns out to be reclaiming the city streets. In the light of Walter Benjamin’s theory of the ‘flâneur’, Sasha’s role of the “unwilling detective” (Benjamin 2006: 72) investigating consumer society is put forward. At last, Rhys’ criticism of narcissism develops into a political discourse by suggesting how narcissism can become a
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means to resist the nationalist discourse of the time. All in all, these Modernist novels present different types of narcissistic mothers. Gertrude Morel is an overwhelming mother who fosters her son’s narcissistic personality, which turns out to develop his artistic faculties; while the mothers in *Dubliners*, who try to live out their dream through their daughters also demonstrate the extent to which their actions are controlled by socio-economic pressures. Virginia Woolf’s narcissistic mother (Mrs. Ramsay) appears to lack empathy but her emotional detachment allows her children to separate and develop their own sense of self. Sasha’s narcissistic scar appears to be the result of a traumatic experience, namely the death of her infant, which pushes her to find reparative measures through consumerism. The range of texts covered in this book – from working-class Midlands, Irish Catholic, Victorian-Edwardian intelligentsia to post-colonial cosmopolitan – show that narcissism inevitably involve socio-economic components and has a collected dimension. These Modernist writers demonstrate that it is essential to consider the interaction of social and economic factors before condemning these self-absorbed mothers, for Western individualistic society seems to advocate the romanticized but erroneous image of ‘perfect mother’, while at the same time fostering their narcissistic behaviour. If Modernist literature provides countless examples of narcissistic mothers, this issue is not specific to 20th century Western society; it continues to this day to draw attention and generates discussions, for instance with the recent controversy surrounding the social development of ‘Tiger Mother’ in Chinese culture and the concept of ‘Kyōiku Mama’ in modern Japanese society, which refer to a harsh and demanding mother, who pushes her children to climb the social ladder through rigorous education and competition.