

# The British Novel and Lacan: Duality and Reflection

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This paper looks at the relationship between two British female writers, Virginia Woolf and Zadie Smith, in relation to the theories of the mirror stage and desire of the mother constructed by the prominent psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. Both Woolf and Smith discuss identity through their characters' reflection and social structures, and Lacan's insight into the human psyche allows me to read these two psychological authors. These two fields, literature and psychology, parallel each other, but Lacan is clinical and Woolf and Smith are subjective. I argue in my paper that Woolf and Smith, from two different generations (one is a modernist; the other, a postmodernist), differ as writers because Smith is more interested in social structures such as race and religion when reflecting on her characters' identities, whereas Woolf is more interested in the relationship between characters and introspection. This paper concludes that looking at British texts through a Lacanian lens is significant because it shows that there has been a shift in what is considered psychologically and sociologically relevant from Woolf's time to ours.

Virginia Woolf and Zadie Smith have almost a century between them, but helped to define British literature with their sensational plotlines and deeply misunderstood central characters. Likewise, Jacques Lacan revolutionized psychology and literary criticism by introducing profound theories that explored the identity and the self. I want to acknowledge how large of a role children (or the concept of children) plays in relation to these writers' novels and Lacanian terminology. Almost all psychoanalytic theories begin with the child, because it's where personality and cognitive thought originate. Along those same lines, the significance of children in Smith and Woolf's novels is directly tied to the significance of mothers, because the mother and child bond is extremely influential in terms of psychology. In Lacan's concept of desire of the mother, this relationship is especially complex, because it can rapidly become sexual. The reason both writers incorporate mothers and Lacan emphasizes the desire of the mother is because mothers

completely embody reflection, and arguably that's where the main line of comparison can be found between literature and psychology in this case. Lacan often writes about reflection as a tool for the search of the "self," and that someone could never recognize their "self" until reflection was explored, because the child only learns behaviors and patterns from reflecting or mirroring others (namely mothers). But the two women writers use reflection differently; they echo reflection in the bonds between their characters (many of which aren't the typical mother and child relationship). Therefore, in this paper, I will argue that multiple Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, such as the mirror stage and desire of the mother, are introduced in several of Virginia Woolf and Zadie Smith's novels and incorporate infantilizing adults, or emphasizing an actual child's lack of experience and deep-rooted societal fears. Looking at their characters through an incredibly narrow psychoanalytic lens will properly decipher their motives and

unconscious in relation to other characters, while also explicating the duality of reflection within some literary relationships.

Starting off with the mirror stage in Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is purposeful, because the mirror stage is explored extensively within Lacan's theory and in the field of psychology. The mirror stage can be described as when a child develops a sense of itself as a whole as if it identified with the image of itself that can be seen as a reflection in a mirror. Lacan discusses the mirror stage at great length in his paper, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," where he says that, "We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan 503). At its core, the mirror stage determines and creates human identity, which can be seen throughout Woolf and Smith's texts through various transformations. It should be noted that while Lacan's theory assumes a child is the focus, this model can shift when applied to literature. In other words, the child (or adult) now comprehends that by being reflected in a mirror, a separate identity exists outside of his or her previously understood sense of "self." Lacan even hints that his theory could be applied to adults when he writes, "This fragmented body...usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual" (506). Aggression can originate in children, but is closely linked in literature to adolescents and adults; perhaps this pathos results in the unraveling of human identity. Considering the mirror stage and applying it to British literature is endlessly helpful when trying to decipher Lacan, because the mirror stage can appear in texts without explanation or warning. To understand Lacan is to understand the mirror stage, so by looking at

the mirror stage on a micro level, the theory will become linked to the texts as a whole. By analyzing and applying *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf and *White Teeth* and *NW*, by Zadie Smith, to the mirror stage, the inner linings of characterization will be revealed.

The easiest way to tell if a character could be entering the mirror stage is to look at scenes that mention looking glasses or mirrors, because objects that reflect that individual only get mentioned by the author if it specifically pertains to them seeing their reflection. This is not always possible in some texts, as we will soon see, but looking glasses seem to appear constantly in Virginia Woolf's revolutionary novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. The first scene where the reader gets to confront a character looking at a mirror is after Peter and Clarissa have their first encounter in Clarissa's house. Following that scene, Peter is muttering to himself about Clarissa outside and Woolf writes, "And there he was, this fortunate man, himself, reflected in the plate-glass window of a motor-car manufacturer in Victoria Street" (48). This detail comes to the reader immediately after the narrator explains that Peter is in love, so this reflective moment is heightened under this circumstance, because Peter is seeing his reflection mirrored back to him, so the question is: What does Peter see? When the narrator refers to Peter as "Now really for the first time in his life, in love" (49), we could naturally assume Woolf is referring to his fiancé back in India, but in the sentence following the aforementioned one, Woolf writes that "Clarissa had grown hard" (49), which hints that Peter is still enamored with Clarissa despite his engagement to another woman. The reflection in the window imposes that if we see Peter as a child, who is just now discovering that he still loves Clarissa as much as he did when they were younger, it could be argued that Peter Walsh is seeing a whole new self. He obviously has attempted to create an identity separate from his

previous identity that is associated with his youth (and his former infatuation with Clarissa) by proposing marriage to a new woman. However, it seems that when the two identities metaphorically meet whenever Peter saw Clarissa after all that time, Peter sees his reflection in the window and like a child realizing that he exists outside of himself, Peter realizes that he is still in love with Clarissa.

Another small instance of a reflection is when Dr. Holmes comes to see the state of Septimus' mental health. Woolf writes, "Dr. Holmes came again. Large, fresh coloured, handsome, flicking his boots, looking in the glass, he brushed it all aside" (91). Throughout the novel, Dr. Holmes seems oblivious and unsympathetic to Septimus' plight, and it seems to tie in to the popular psychology at the time: post-war British culture deemed that the war is over, so the veterans are fine. Dr. Holmes tries to mirror this belief to Septimus, but is rejected through Septimus' suicide, showing the antagonistic ideals of post-war England towards its veterans at this time and the power of the mirror stage.

The exploration of the self in Virginia Woolf's novels persists in *To the Lighthouse*; the text offers a variety of potential passages that have Lacanian connotations. For example, when Mrs. Ramsay lets Rose help her pick out jewelry before the dinner party, and Mrs. Ramsay reacts to her letting Rose do this every night by saying, "It was so inadequate, what one could give in return; and what Rose felt was quite out of proportion to anything she actually was" (Woolf 81). Not only is this a situation with potential mirrors (usually mirrors accompany picking out jewelry), but Mrs. Ramsay feels the need to tell the reader that what Rose is doing is not unordinary; she remembers doing something similar for her mother what she was at that age. But in the passage above, she recalls that there is very little gain by performing trivial tasks like picking out jewelry, and furthermore Mrs. Ramsay

cruelly notes that even though Rose may feel she's important for picking out her jewelry, it doesn't really matter. Lacan's mirror stage is usually accompanied by a mother figure, because an infant tends to mirror their mother more than anyone else at the beginning. Mrs. Ramsay is calling into question whether this is valid, because she knows Rose will end up being just like her, and we know that Mrs. Ramsay might be a depressed woman in an unsatisfied marriage. If Rose mirrors her mother, perhaps Woolf is suggesting that life becomes an endless cycle of little gain but small satisfactory sensations. The scene is discreetly Lacanian. In contrast, a blatantly obvious Lacanian scene is in the midst of the abandonment and rotting of the beach house: "and the mirror itself was but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness...the mirror was broken" (Woolf 134). This passage explicitly mentions mirrors, which makes Woolf's purpose clear: something is being reflected. After the death of Mrs. Ramsay, the house could very well be reflecting on the passing of its caretaker, the person the joy of the house relied on. This in turn leads to the death of the house, because eventually all of the characters reflect and mirror the death of Mrs. Ramsay.

*Orlando*, which was written in honor of Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West, can also be examined with the mirror stage in mind. Unlike the previous two texts, *Orlando* experimented with gender bending and an extreme range of sexuality, which arguably ties into Lacan's mirror stage quite easily. Mirrors are mentioned frequently in this text (it seems to be a theme in Woolf's work), but one of the most important instances of a mirror is when Orlando undergoes the transformation from man to woman. Woolf writes, "Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath" (102). The narrator of this story seems to assume that Orlando should be distraught over his

newfound gender, but Orlando proceeds to take this change in stride and continues to live his life as before. Looking at his reflection does not frighten him, but rather, it seems to liberate him from the trivialities of manhood. Even the narrator seems to act as a sort of mirror between the reader and Orlando when the text says, “His memory – but in the future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’ – her memory then” (103). The reader assumingly doesn’t know how to process Orlando’s gender change, and the narrator has to reflect what we are supposed to see in Orlando, rather than what we used to see or still see. Lacan’s mirror stage is often described as when an infant develops a sense of itself as a whole rather than a formless and fragmented mass. When Orlando looks into the mirror, it seems that both the narrator and Orlando realize that Orlando was meant to be a woman this entire time, or that gender itself is meaningless and it doesn’t matter in relation to the plot of the story, because Orlando has now acknowledged who she is and what that means in relation to her identity. Orlando’s transformation is seemingly as simple as this sentence: “Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since” (Woolf 103).

Surprisingly, Orlando isn’t the only person in this novel to undergo the complex nature of rapidly changing gender identities. Archduke Harry and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire can also identify with these transformations as well, which speaks volumes about the greater society Orlando is a part of. In Elizabethan England, women weren’t allowed to act in plays, so many men would cross dress inside and outside the theater. This deviant trend would certainly leak over into the aristocracy, which might explain why Archduke Harry is sometimes Archduchess Harriet. The fact that other people besides Orlando are going through gender identity transformations implies that Orlando’s society is starting to embrace new

cultures and gender concepts, which could be Woolf blatantly calling out her own society, because those who were outside the gender norms were often made into pariahs. Unlike Archduke Harry, Marmaduke seems to identify with Orlando, because they seemingly undergo the same gender transformation, only reversed. When they first meet, Orlando cries, “You’re a woman, Shel!” (Woolf 184) and Shel replies, “You’re a man, Orlando!” (184). While they are outing each other, they seem even more in love after this interaction. Arguably, this is because Shel and Orlando see themselves in each other. They are both dually gendered; Orlando is a woman, but has the ferocity of a man and Shel is a man but has the temperament for a woman. In her essay titled, “The Flight of a Word: Narcissism and the Masquerade of Writing in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*,” Ellen Carol Jones argues that if “the self and sex are heterogeneous, they are so as endless reflections –and refractions– of the self’s desire for itself or for an other created through metaphor out of the self” (155). Jones is suggesting that because the self and sex are separated from one another, then one has to continuously reflect the other. To society, Shel and Orlando only fall in love and marry because they are a man and a woman, but to the reader, the narrator, and to Shel and Orlando, they fall in love and marry because their genders almost cancel each other out, since they have both experienced both genders. Consequently, now they are experiencing both and have to terms with their respective “selves.”

Moving from Virginia Woolf to Zadie Smith is a relatively stable transition, because the two authors both deal with psychological trauma and self-identity a good amount. While Woolf tends to focus on depression and duality of the personality, Smith takes identity from a racial angle, thus tying culture to the “self.” And unlike Woolf, Smith subtly brings up reflection with her characters, rather than blatantly including

mirrors at every turn. Trying to pinpoint actual mirrors in Smith's work would be rather laborious and perhaps considered beating a dead horse, since there is an abundance of mirrors in Woolf's novels. Instead, we will be analyzing specific cases of where a character's "self" becomes compromised. Physical mirrors can be determined in at least one of the cases, but because Smith is a contemporary writer, it may be needed to look beyond the mirror, and perhaps even beyond Lacan. Interestingly enough, characters in both of the novels that I will be analyzing who have underlying self-identity trauma are English-Jamaican women, so racial and gender factors should be acknowledged to truly understand why the characters in Smith's novels mirror their "selves" dangerously. Unlike Woolf's characters who seem to mirror their identities either back to another character or back to themselves, Smith's novels seem to express that a lack of identity is both unhealthy and is a result of external factors (such as race or gender). In short, identity in Smith's novels seems to be sociologically and politically charged, while Woolf focuses more on psychology and human perception.

Zadie Smith's first novel, *White Teeth*, was absolutely a bestseller smash in multiple countries, including England and the United States. It examines racial tension within specific neighborhoods in London and the longitudinal nature of some friendships. In some instances, it also looks at the concept of beauty and how this cultural phenomenon of being "beautiful" can tie into both race and identity. Furthermore, both of these factors form how an individual sees the "self."

The character of Irie should be examined specifically in one of the scenes that opens her section: the hair scene. Hair appears frequently in *White Teeth*, but when Irie decides to make her Afro straight and dye it red, her identity clearly takes a hard hit. When Jackie forgets to tell Andrea that

Irie had washed her hair the previous day and the ammonia burns Irie's scalp, she passes out. This truly proves that beauty has a price in this novel, especially for African American women whose beauty is warped due to unrealistic societal pressures. When Irie protests that the ammonia is hurting her, Andrea the hairdresser replies, "Life hurts . . . beauty hurts" (Smith 231). When Irie wakes up, Andrea instructs her to look in the mirror and Smith writes, "Now look. Hair that had once come down to her mid-vertebrae was only a few inches from her head" (231). Irie is forced to look at her identity and acknowledge that her idea of beauty is coming from an outside group, and that the same outside group makes money off of it. The interaction between Irie and the hairdressers, the hair saleswoman, etc. ties into identity because she feels like she is forced to change herself to make Millat see her as attractive. This connection to identity is confirmed when a black woman and the owner of the hair store get in an argument, after which Irie finds herself outside with the woman. Irie expresses, "I need hair" (Smith 325) and the woman replies with "You've got hair" (235), obviously stating that Irie's conception of beauty is twisted from pop culture and high school, but Irie goes along with the transformation anyway. In her book review titled, "Biting off More than You Can Chew: Review of Zadie Smith's '*White Teeth*,'" Sara Nichols adamantly states that Smith's novel is "not about class, it's about race" (65). This review insinuates that Smith bit off more than she could chew with her first novel, because she doesn't explore the political implications of her characters' actions. However, Nichols praises Smith for exploring "whiteness" and identity within contemporary England, because there is such an alarming separation between the rest of the characters and the Chalfens, who seem alien in their own right but who also seem to control and manipulate the minority groups. Lacan didn't explore race into great detail, but many scholars have taken on the task of

applying his psychoanalytic theories to the social construct of race, and how identity is affected as a result. Because Lacan's mirror stage is directly associated with identity, analyzing how the "self" becomes fragmented from a racial cause can help explain why Irie wants to feel distanced from her culture.

Ewa Plonowska Ziarek mentions in her article, "Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race" that "Anxiety is a necessary correlative of the unconscious subjection to the signifier of Whiteness, which promises the fullness of identity by disclaiming its historical constitution" (348). Ziarek's complex rhetoric, stemming from Lacan, helps readers see how Irie's identity is being reflected back to her with the treatment she gets from society, thus causing her anxiety and prompting her to have the identity she thinks she should have mirrored back to her. By this, I mean the straight, red hair she desires. *White Teeth* has many underlying themes, as we will see the next time it comes up in this discussion, but racial tension is certainly one of the most prominent. Additionally, the "whiteness" of beauty that Irie experiences is interesting from a Lacanian point of view, because unlike the other characters we have looked at in terms of the mirror stage, Irie is actually a child. Granted, she is not an infant, which is when Lacan usually applies the mirror stage, but she is the most impressionable. This prompts the question of: is Irie truly questioning her culture and heritage because of the overwhelming "white" influences in her life (i.e. the Chalfens) or is she just so young that she is experiencing a type of "adolescent" mirror stage and her attempted abandonment of her roots is a result of this reflection from larger society? Either direction is arguable, but Irie's dysfunction is clearly interlaced within her reflection of her "self" and race.

Friendship and self-identification are themes that are brought up in many of Zadie Smith's novels, including her most recent

work, *NW*. *NW* and *White Teeth* are distinct and entirely separate from each other in multiple respects, but the topic of friendship is still a prevalent topic in *NW*, and it continues to affect how an individual's reflection gets mirrored back to them within society. Specifically, I want to examine why exactly the character of Keisha becomes Natalie, and how this name transformation means something much more meaningful in terms of the Lacanian mirror stage.

The Natalie/Keisha segment of *NW* is by far the longest and most involved section of the novel, which makes a reader wonder why Smith set the novel up this way. Leah and Natalie are best friends from a young age, though Natalie goes through more of an identity crisis than Leah, while Leah seems more confused about her sexuality than Natalie. Smith writes, "It was clear that Keisha Blake could not start something without finishing it" (207). This passage applies to Keisha at the time, but does it apply to Natalie? On the surface, they remain the same person, because naturally, a person doesn't change their personality with the shift of a name. However, Natalie's identity does become compromised, because her personality shifts as time continues and she abruptly shifts her name to compensate for the lack of reflection she had as a child. This is shown within her relationship with Leah Hanwell, because Smith takes care to mention that the two friends were so different from each other, yet they complimented each other perfectly.

A demonstration of these differences and similarities is shown in the chart Smith includes at the beginning of Natalie's section, with two columns for each girl and answers to potential questions, such as favorite color and dream job. The questions aren't listed; we are forced to articulate them in our minds, which makes the chart sort of like a game. The only answers Keisha and Leah agree upon are "E.T." and "Deaf" (Smith 205) and this agreement is very foretelling in terms of Lacan's mirror stage,

because in this instance, Keisha and Leah are mirroring each other. In assuming that the question asked where “deaf” was the answer is “Would you rather be blind or deaf?,” or something along those lines, the fact that both girls put “deaf” is startling, especially with Keisha because we know she changes her name later on. If Keisha chooses not to be blind, she has to see her identity in various reflections throughout her life, therefore proving that her identity as child makes her so uncomfortable, that she has to change her identity to Natalie. Keisha and Leah’s mirroring of each other and their eventual separation when they go to college leads to another mirrored image, and this additional mirrored image is how Natalie is conceived.

Lacan’s mirror stage does have its complexities, most notably because it is intertwined with the Imaginary order and Symbolic order, but these terms shed no light on the topic in this discourse since I seek to analyze the mirror stage at its most basic level. Reflection and identity are at the heart of the mirror stage, and applying this concept to Woolf and Smith’s novels proves that several characters see themselves reflected through multiple channels. It seems that the majority of Virginia Woolf’s characters and novels have “positive” reflections. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, it isn’t necessarily a bad thing that Peter’s identity is split, because through this dual identity, he learns that he still loves Clarissa. In *Orlando*, Marmaduke and Orlando reflecting each other through their ambiguous genders could be interpreted as extremely positive, because they love the ungendered reflections they see in one another. Conversely, Zadie Smith’s character reflection can be perceived as more negative. In *White Teeth*, Irie’s reflection and identity is directly tied to her race and specifically, the influence of white culture. In *NW*, Natalie/Keisha is forced to split her identity between two due to the loss of Leah Hanwell. These negative and positive connotations associated with the mirror stage might be attributed to the different time

periods (Modernism v. Post-Modernism), or even the writing styles of the two authors. However, it seems ironic that Virginia Woolf is usually portrayed as depressed and her writing is associated with sadness, but the characters’ reflections can easily be seen as positive.

Shifting from the mirror stage to desire of the mother can be considered difficult, because the two are both closely linked but very distant from each other. The mirror stage deals primarily with reflection and the realization that something greater exists outside of the mind. Desire of the mother is characterized by the concept of desire, which Lacan talks about extensively. An impressive Lacanian analysis incorporating desire was done by Jacques Lacan himself when he wrote a critical response to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* titled, “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*.” He spends half the essay discussing how Ophelia is an object within Hamlet’s reality and the other half analyzing Hamlet’s potential Oedipal relationship with his mother, where Lacan explicitly delves into desire of the mother. Lacan breaks desire down to more than just a basic human instinct when he writes, “There is first of all a simple relationship that the subject has to the object of desire, a relationship that I have expressed in terms of appointment” (Lacan 41). Desire is an abstract concept that becomes embodied by both the object (the mother) and the subject (the individual forming the desire). Highly influenced by Freud, Lacan draws this theory somewhat from the father of psychoanalysis, because it has a lot to do with male genitalia. Freud emphasized the importance of the male penis, but Lacan focuses on the phallus. Again, like the mirror stage, Lacan uses a child as his main example. This will change when I apply the texts to the theory, but for the sake of explanation, we will use Lacan’s example. Desire of the mother takes place around the same time as the mirror stage, because children realize that they not fragmented

masses. Children realize that there are also other reflections besides their own. They then latch onto their main nurturers, and in most western cultures, that is the mother. Children's own desires are shaped from what they perceive as the desires of their nurturers, and this is when the desire of the mother actually starts because a child perceives that "my mother only wants me and I only want my mother." Oedipal complexes stem from this early relationship, and it should be emphasized that the child's main goal is to please the mother because of this mutual desire. Applying this theory to Virginia Woolf and Zadie Smith's novels is crucial, because desire of the mother is directly linked to the mirror stage by the fact that both concepts deal with identity. The child's identity is directly tied to the mother's during this desire period, and both identities have the potential to become compromised in certain situations.

While desire of the mother is the main concept that I will explore at this point, it is critical to first know what Lacan means by desire. *Mrs. Dalloway* serves this purpose well, because very few mother/son relationships exist within the novel, and those that are present seem to be insignificant. The other novels that are touched on will critically examine desire of the mother relationships, but to ease in this complex concept, explicating desire within *Mrs. Dalloway* will demonstrate how Lacan ties desire to identity. "Lacan reserves the word 'desire' to refer to that transcendent, unconditional ingredient in the demand for love, the peculiarly human emptiness that cannot be satisfied by any object or proof of love" (83), argues Edward S. Casey and J. Melvin Woody in their essay, "Hegel, Heidegger, Lacan: The Dialectic of Desire." This definition adequately relates to *Mrs. Dalloway*, because if we are still applying the "infant" role to Peter from the mirror stage, then he is the one who feels the need to expand and act on his desire. Without a doubt, Peter desires Clarissa in every sense

of the word. He desired her when they were younger, and as we explored in the mirror stage, he even went to distant countries to try and forget about his desire for Clarissa. However, this coping mechanism fails, because he ends up coming back and visiting her once again. He starts to have small realizations that his desire for Clarissa never really left him when he first sees his reflection in the car window, because he is blatantly seeing the self that loves Clarissa, but also the self that has to put on the front that he loves his fiancée in India.

Peter doesn't fully immerse himself in his realization until Clarissa's party, and this is shown when the narrator says, "She seemed . . . having that gift still; to be; to exist; to sum it all up in the moment as she passed; turned, caught her scarf in some other woman's dress, unhitched it, laughed, all with the most perfect ease and air of a creature floating in its element" (Woolf 174). Peter continues to watch Clarissa's every move, and even notices insignificant details, like her scarf and her laugh. At the party, when Peter is talking to Sally, his two selves are clashing, and it's obvious that the self that he tried to bury (the one that loves Clarissa) wins by a landslide. To make the argument exceedingly Freudian, Peter could be interpreting Clarissa as his mother figure, because he is even more enamored with her now that she's older and has Elizabeth. If we look at Peter as an infant who not only desires Clarissa, but also desires Clarissa as a mother figure, that arguably changes the text interiorly. Nonetheless, it is easy to see Peter's excessive desire for Clarissa, especially when looking at the last two sentences of the novel: "It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was" (Woolf 194). In other words, Clarissa doesn't have to do anything but simply exist for Peter to desire her. Casey and Woody's definition of desire as "that transcendent, unconditional ingredient" could certainly apply to Peter's admirations towards Clarissa, because his desire transcends time, space, and continents.



Unlike *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* does not lack for desire between a mother and son. There are multiple instances where James Ramsay explicitly expresses desire for Mrs. Ramsay, his mother and nurturer. One of the ideas Lacan offers that goes along with desire of the mother is the child's hatred towards the father, although this instance won't appear in every relationship that is characterized by desire of the mother. Some Freudian psychoanalysts believe that every man wants to subconsciously kill his father and sexually obtain his mother. Lacan reiterates this paradigm in the previously mentioned "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire" when he states, "It's not simply that the subject wanted, desired to kill his father and to violate his mother, but that that is in the unconscious" (45). There is some amount of jealousy that can be accounted for in this theory, but Lacan takes care to point out that the subject will always desire its mother, and will therefore get aggressive if anyone else also desire its mother. In the Oedipal relationship where desire of the mother is characterized and initiated by the son, the aggression is usually directed towards the father. This assumption can tie into how James views his father, Mr. Ramsay, because it can be argued that James wants to kill his father for the reason that he sexually obtained his mother. James' anger can be seen when his father merely walks into the room, specifically in chapter eight when James describes Mr. Ramsay's "exaltation and sublimity of his gestures . . . the magnificence of his head; for his exactingness and egotism (for there he stood, commanding them to attend to him)" (Woolf 36). James mentions the most excruciatingly small details about his father that he despises, which shows that this is not a normal or healthy level of hatred for one's father, because James seemingly doesn't show any viable reasons for hating his father, such as abuse or neglect. And it could be argued that Mr. Ramsay neglects his children, because he

seldom speaks to them, but James doesn't point this out; instead he is infuriated that Mr. Ramsay dare distract his mother from him. "By looking fixedly at the page," Woolf writes, "he hoped to make him move on; by pointing his finger at a word, he hoped to recall his mother's attention, which, he knew angrily, wavered instantly his father stopped" (37). At the start of the novel, James is six years old, so he could very well be considered the infant that never broke the bond of desire for his mother. He is still a young boy, so that attachment for his mother hasn't weakened; on the contrary, it has gotten stronger. Because of this one-way desire bond from James to his mother, his mother becomes the lighthouse that James so badly wants to travel to, because like his mother, it is unattainable. In Sheldon Brivic's article titled, "Love as Destruction in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," he writes that "love is both beneficial and destructive" (65) in Woolf's novel, because as Lacan mentions in his theory, "The need for independence is as strong as the interdependence of the self and other in a loving relationship" (65). James seems completely dependent on Mrs. Ramsay for everything, including his definition of love. He views his father as both stranger and intruder within their relationship, because he thinks Mr. Ramsay is out to make James independent from his mother.

Then, Mrs. Ramsay dies and the family doesn't come back to the house for ten years. When they do return, Cam, James, and Mr. Ramsay take a boat ride to see the lighthouse. James is a young man at this point and still seems agitated with his father, but the reader gets a sense that this trip to the lighthouse might mend something between father and son. When they do see the lighthouse, James is also seeing his mother. Whether this is a sexual experience or not is difficult to pinpoint, because now that Mrs. Ramsay is deceased, James' sexual desires towards his mother may have disappeared. Now, when he looks at the lighthouse, he is

simply seeing his mother for what she is: majestic and permanent. Additionally, he has a realization about his father, in that “It was not him, that old man reading, whom he wanted to kill, but it was the thing that descended on him” (Woolf 184). He sympathizes with his father in this quote, which could appropriately signal James’ timely exit out of desire of the mother.

Unlike *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* lacks mothers. Orlando’s actual mother is barely mentioned, so on the surface, desire of the mother isn’t a factor within the text. However, one of the most well-known motherly figures in history appears in a sexual relationship with Orlando, which often gets overlooked because it happens so early in the book. Queen Elizabeth I is the queen of England when the book starts, and she immediately takes an interest in Orlando from the moment they meet. He becomes her steward shortly after and begins to engage in a seemingly sexual relationship with the Queen of England, a figure widely seen as the “mother” of England, with nicknames like “The Virgin Queen.” She had no children of her own, so she arguably viewed the country as her child, and she took care of it well. In the novel, when she becomes infatuated with Orlando, her mother status becomes heightened, because she is leagues older than him, yet she desires him. While Elizabeth I is not Orlando’s actual mother, desire of the mother still comes into play in their relationship, because their bond is so sexualized, but also maternal. Woolf says in the text about their relationship, “He rose, half suffocated from the embrace. ‘This,’ she breathed, ‘is my victory!’ – even as a rocket roared up and dyed her cheeks scarlet” (20). While the text is purposely ambiguous, Orlando and Elizabeth I could very well be engaging in intercourse, and the “rocket” roaring up is the Queen’s orgasm, which demonstrates how happy Orlando makes the Queen in her old age. Orlando clearly desires the Queen on some level, whether his

motivation be love or reputation, but desire of the mother is somewhat reversed into desire of the child in this case, because the Queen blatantly becomes angry when Orlando kisses or flirts with other girls.

Jaime Hovey analyzes gender as a performance in *Orlando*, and explicates Judith Butler extensively on the subject in his article titled “‘Kissing a Negress in the Dark’: Englishness as a Masquerade in Woolf’s *Orlando*,” since performance and gender are very much in her wheelhouse. She explains, “The notion of gender as performative has been read as an element of the law that, according to Judith Butler’s Lacanian observations, ‘takes sexual difference as a presupposition of its own intelligibility’” (397). Gender and performance are arguably extremely crucial to look at in *Orlando* and especially in relation to Queen Elizabeth I, because she was known for her theater of majesty. She not only influenced the theater during her reign, but she also made herself larger than life by portraiture and how she styled herself. This tied directly to her gender, because the reason she had to influence the country with these indirect routes was because she was a woman ruling England. In the novel, Elizabeth is considerably older than she was in the peak of her reign, which might affect the reason behind her relationship with Orlando. She has been performing her whole life through her gender, and now that she is older and is expected to die any day, she wants to let her guard down and become sexually aware of her status as a mother figure. With Orlando, she feels both desired and maternal, which influences the duality of not only her character, but also *Orlando* as a novel.

Zadie Smith’s novels are startlingly like *Orlando* in that neither of them incorporates actual mother and son relations. In fact, James and Mrs. Ramsay’s relationship in *To the Lighthouse* is the only novel I’ll be analyzing that actually involves mother and son. Like Orlando and Queen

Elizabeth, I will now be focusing on relationships that simply model the desire of the mother dynamic, because the fact that these characters are seeking potentially sexual relationships from mother figures, rather than their actual mothers, is fascinating to the topic of identity. I'm sure actual mother/son relationships can be explored within Smith's novels, such as Alsana and Millat or Joyce and Josh Chalfen in *White Teeth*, but neither of these relationships or any other actual familial relationships seem inappropriate to the point of desire of the mother.

Race and gender have come up in my discussion of Lacan and identity, but religion rarely does, because Woolf almost never focuses on the topic, but Smith emphasizes religion in both *NW* and *White Teeth*. Specifically, in *White Teeth*, Hinduism and Jehovah's Witnesses are represented through the Iqbals and the Bowdens. One could write a whole other discussion of reflection within Hinduism, but because desire of the mother is being looked at here, the potentially inappropriate relationship between Hortense Bowden and Ryan Topps has to be acknowledged. Their dynamic is certainly strange and could be considered as a mother/son relationship. During her adolescence, Clara Bowden has an innocent crush on Ryan Topps. She wants to save him from materialism and the wrath of hell (this is undoubtedly coming from her religious background), but also wants him to like her. Imagine Clara's surprise when she comes home from school one day and sees that her mother, Hortense, has started to spiritually seduce Ryan with her cooking. The change within Ryan occurs at a seemingly rapid speed, at least to Clara, and finally comes to fruition when Smith writes, "On the occasion she spotted Ryan at the kitchen table, surrounded by leaflets—and Hortense hurriedly gathering them up and shoving them into her apron pocket—Clara *willed* herself to forget it" (34). This is behavior an adulterous couple would exemplify if they

got caught in the act, so it doesn't come as a surprise that Clara is suspicious of perhaps a deeper bond between her mother and Ryan than just him enjoying her food. Hortense is obviously not getting much sexual or physical satisfaction from her husband (he seems to get satisfaction from the television), so when she encounters Ryan Topps, perhaps she experiences the longing for what Clara feels towards Ryan. I don't want to jump to Lacanian conclusions and assume that Hortense and Ryan are engaging in a sexual relationship when he is still Clara's age, but there is certainly a spiritual and food-related relationship, which can be just as powerful as a sexual encounter. Hortense manages to convert Ryan to her religion, and he accepts it without a fight (this submission is probably intertwined with the food). With this conversion of Ryan, Hortense feels some sexual satisfaction because she is controlling a male through spirituality and religion.

When Irie visits her grandmother much later in the novel, we learn that Ryan and Hortense's relationship never ceased. If anything, it accelerated and can now be considered sexual. When Irie goes to live with Hortense and it is revealed that she and Ryan are living together, Smith writes, "Hortense seemed incredibly nervous about the immediate likelihood that he should raise his head and spot the girl standing by the stove" (321). This passage proves that perhaps, Hortense doesn't want Ryan to notice Irie because she's afraid he will fall in love with her because she looks like Clara. Her sexual dominance wavers with Irie's presence, and she's not sure their religious relationship is strong enough to bear the return of Clara's daughter. Hortense's jealousy clearly indicates something on a larger scale than just a religious conversion and good food; Ryan sees Hortense as a mother figure and a religious guide. Therefore, desire of the mother is present within *White Teeth* and especially in the spiritual connection between Hortense Bowden and Ryan Topps.

Like *White Teeth*, Smith's *NW* doesn't have many unusual desire of the mother pairings, but there are certainly indications of a younger man having child-like sensations towards their older and maternal sexual partners. Specifically, Felix and Annie fit this category, because of the age gap between them and because their relationship seems almost forbidden and taboo, as the actual mother/son relationship is usually seen as. The purpose of Felix's visit to Annie is unclear and difficult to analyze, because it's obvious the minute they talk to each other that there is or was a sexual attraction between them. However, we know that Felix is with Grace, so Annie is automatically thrown into this "other woman" category. When Smith describes Annie as an older woman (assumably much older than Felix), Annie remains the other woman, but also takes on a maternal role. "Even in the few months since he'd last been here the lines under her eyes seemed to have lengthened and deepened," Smith writes about Annie's appearance, "fanning out beyond the shades" (162). This connection of age becomes even more prominent, considering Felix's lack of an actual mother. He visits his father, Lloyd, at the beginning of his section, and Lloyd mentions Felix's mother often, such as lines like, "Your mudder was a black hole" (Smith 126). Lloyd never talks about the mother in a positive light, and Felix hardly acknowledges her existence at all, so we can reasonably conclude that the actual mother is either out of the picture or deceased. It seems that Felix uses Annie as a sort of replacement for the loss of his own mother, and the sexual relationship rapidly expanded from there. He "desired" his mother, not necessarily sexually, but certainly in terms of affection and attention. When this desire is rejected, he finds it in sexual gratification with Annie.

When Felix and Annie have sex on the roof, Felix feels shame and guilt for his actions, while it seems like Annie is just looking for something to do. Their

rendezvous is incredibly secretive, shown when Smith writes, "He got her by the shoulder, not gently, and together they scabbled to the edge of the wall, where they told themselves they couldn't be seen" (182). Both of them don't want to be caught in the act, and neither of them particularly enjoy it, so why does Felix cheat on his girlfriend? It appears that this act of sexual desire and satisfaction is natural to Felix, and he needs Annie to reassure himself that he is loved, because she is now his mother figure. This goes back to Lacan's definition of reflection, because Felix's concept of desire is intertwined with Annie, even though he originally came there to break things off with her. It's impossible for him, because Felix and Annie's desire for each other is reflected when they interact and thus perpetuates their mother/son relationship.

Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis is both narrow and considerably bewildering, but his unmatched theories on reflection, characterized in the mirror stage and desire of the mother, shows that identity is unstable. Additionally, both the mirror stage and desire of the mother characterizes these literary figures as children, because some reflections are premature and underdeveloped. This is significant, because many of the characters within these dynamics are adults; from a typical psychological standpoint, they wouldn't fit into the Lacanian paradigm. However, I argue that it is possible to see Peter Walsh as an adult and Peter Walsh as the child, because both have ancient emotion for Clarissa Dalloway. Conversely, I also acknowledge that James Ramsey is a child, but he has very advanced, seemingly adult hate for his father. Deliberately connecting Lacan and two influential British authors from vastly different time periods reveals that identity is fluid and malleable no matter what century it is. Lacan was developing his theories primarily in the mid-1900s, almost right in the middle between Virginia Woolf and Zadie Smith. The timeline is significant, because Virginia Woolf didn't know of his

existence, yet incorporated an abundance of mirrors in her novels. Zadie Smith could very well be aware of Lacan's influence, but doesn't blatantly show mother/son relationships or mirrors in her texts. The fact that his theories are obvious in some of the novels and subtly interpreted in others indicates that these authors made their writing purposefully flexible, because the identities of the characters are as unstable as the interpretations. Race, gender, and even religion all play a large part in these novels, but reflection seems to be the factor that holds everything together, because the characters, and therefore readers, interpret various meanings from how the characters see their reflections. Looking at these literal reflections in the mirror stage and how mother and son see each other through their intimate bond demonstrates the unwavering imbalance between identity and the "self," thus demonstrating once again Lacan's contribution to literary criticism and interpretation.

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