

**Girl in Progress:  
Navigating the Mortal Coils of Growing Up  
in the Fiction of Jacqueline Wilson**

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*For my grandmother, Isla Clark, who was always disappointed if I was not reading a book*

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And I won't forget my friends for sharing cake and conversation with me. Thank you for the distraction.

## Abstract

The following presents a discussion of the work of children's and young adult novelist, Jacqueline Wilson. My focus is on Wilson's treatment of issues that are quite pertinent to growing up and growing up as a girl in particular. Each chapter looks at a specific novel, considering Wilson's representations of such issues as self-harm, eating disorders, and parental mental illness. In doing so, I will approach my subjects from various perspectives, drawing on theory from strands of psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and feminism among others. In doing so I hope to prove the worth of Wilson's work for future critical study (at this stage there has been little written specifically on this author). An interest of mine is the presence of ideology in children's and young adult literature (a certain pedagogy that primarily serves the interests of adults). In discussing the ways in which Wilson presents the above issues, I consider ways in which her work may be seen to subvert such ideologies while still maintaining a sense of responsibility regarding the ability of narratives to influence young audiences. As such, part of my discussion will consist of an analysis of what has been termed by such writers as Melissa Wilson and Kathy Short, and David Elkind as a "postmodern childhood." One in which children must navigate a problematic and less than ideal adult world and in which a developmental endpoint is never certain.

## **Introduction: Adult Ideologies, Postmodern Children and Jacqueline Wilson**

In her introduction to *Radical Children's Literature*, Kimberley Reynolds posits that “children’s literature provides a curious and paradoxical space: a space that is simultaneously highly regulated and overlooked, orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive” (3). The thesis of Reynolds’ work is the “radical potential” (1) of this literature to move beyond a mere vessel of ideology and pedagogy. Along similar lines, the purpose of my own thesis is to discuss the way in which Jacqueline Wilson’s novels avoid a simple reproduction of ideologies which ultimately serve the interests and expectations of adults (primarily the necessity of maturation) and instead provide a space for her young readers to “approach ideas, issues, and objects from new perspectives . . .” (2). I do not at any point suggest that Wilson is particularly revolutionary in her choice of subject matter. So called “problem novels” that deal with such difficult and sensitive issues as rape and death have been in existence for quite some time.<sup>1</sup> I argue that where Wilson’s work differs from the (traditional) problem novel is in the way many of her novels end. Reynolds posits further that in the problem novel “characters are shown to have matured, and by implication, readers too will have moved a step closer to adult knowledge and experience” (2). Wilson, I suggest, does not insist on having her protagonists necessarily learn from their experiences and consequently mature. This argument is part of my first chapter in particular, in which I discuss the subject of a “model of recovery” with reference to Eric Tribunella’s theory that trauma in children’s and young adult literature may provide a kind of “inoculation” against the realities of childhood (xii).

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<sup>1</sup> An early example of the problem novel (from young adult literature) is J.D Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and *Go Ask Alice* (Anonymous, 1971). A more modern example, which will be mentioned in the following chapters, is Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999).

In postulating the above, I argue that many of Wilson's novels are not so much representative of the *Bildungsroman* text as that which has been termed the postmodern *Entwicklungsroman*. Roberta Seelinger Trites defines the *Entwicklungsroman* novel as one of development and growth. The *Bildungsroman* novel on the other hand features a (traditionally male) protagonist who comes of age as an adult by the end of the narrative (10). Existing within the *Entwicklungsroman*, Wilson's protagonists commonly do not have a developmental end point; they do not necessarily mature and they certainly do not become adults in the literal sense. In saying this, the discussion of my third chapter involves a family in which parent/child roles appear to reverse. Nevertheless, I argue that for the most part, Wilson's protagonists appear to be fixed in a process of "becoming." I agree with Trites who positions the *Entwicklungsroman* within the postmodern era. Later in my thesis I discuss the concept of the postmodern childhood in which, as Melissa Wilson and Kathy Short have suggested, it is the child's journey "to construct a home within a postmodern milieu of competing truths and failed adults" (130). In this postmodern world in which a child's needs do not always come first, adult protection and guidance into maturity is not always given. Without wishing to use such derogatory terms as "failed" or "bad", I think it is clear that the adults of Wilson's narratives are not as available or as supportive of their children as would be ideal. In *Falling Apart*, the protagonist's parents are too wrapped up in their thoughts about their dead son to recognise their daughter's destructive cries for attention. In the *Illustrated Mum*, the protagonist's mother suffers from a mental illness that prevents her from properly caring for her daughters. While there is some promise in the novels that the parents may be there for their children in future, it is still not clear whether the protagonists have matured. In this sense, Wilson fiction challenges Tribunella's theory that the purpose of trauma in fiction for young people is to ultimately get children to grow up.

A large part of Trites' argument is the pervasive power which exists in children's and young adult literature (3), a point which I both agree with and contend here. She argues that in literature for young people, power is in the hands of the adults who write and disseminate these narratives. Such texts are designed to shape young people to fit in within certain cultural ideologies (7-8). While critical of the ultimately ideological purpose that is supposed to be at the heart of all children's and young adult literature, I do not intend to argue that power and ideology are not in existence. Part of my analysis in the three chapters that follow is a consideration of some of the ways in which this literature may move readers to think and act in ways that would suggest the considerable influence of the adult author. I argue here that the presence of such does not constitute an attempt at domination or a perpetuation of dominant ideologies. My second chapter considers how Wilson's *Girls Under Pressure* may be read from a Foucauldian perspective concerning the power of society to influence and, literally and figuratively, shape the individual. Foucauldian theory of power, for example, the "domination-repression model", in which the individual exists in a perpetual relationship of force" (*Power/Knowledge* 92, qtd. in 4) is also of interest to Trites. She is, however, ultimately critical of Foucault in that his theory on power does not allow for the "individual's potentially positive power" (5). In suggesting the way in which the protagonist of *Girls Under Pressure* is eventually able to break free from the hold of her eating disorder and her need to "fit in", I also argue that the individual can, to some extent, resist the shaping forces of society. In saying this I hope to avoid implicating Wilson in a perpetuation of these power structures. Lastly, Trites' work is concerned with the way in which "the individual negotiates with her or his society, with the ways adolescents' power is simultaneously acknowledged and denied, engaged and disengaged" (6). In the above, Trites demonstrates the idea that adolescent (and child) power is really in the hands of adults. It is also an apt starting point for discussing the postmodern journey of the child who must navigate through the difficulties of an adult world. However, I

want to suggest that Wilson's work does not ultimately legitimise or reproduce a model of adult domination. While parents/caregivers and the love they can provide is not portrayed as insignificant, their children are often capable of handling themselves and getting by without the help of adults. In fact, in some cases, such as *The Illustrated Mum*, there is a reversal of roles that has the child characters take on more responsibility. While not exactly "dominant", these child characters often demonstrate more strength and resilience than their relatively weak and side lined parents.

In this sense, I argue that Wilson avoids being condescending to both the intertextual and extratextual child and adolescent. In positing this, I wish to bring my introductory remarks full circle by returning to my initial point on trauma narratives and adult intent, something which will also form part of my discussion in the following chapter. Katherine Capshaw Smith's arguments are somewhat incongruous with those of Tribunella's which suggest that the ultimate purpose of trauma narratives is to encourage maturation in young readers. Alternatively, Smith writes that children are considered innocent and "the ultimate victims of trauma, those who require above all else adult protection or guidance . . ." (116). Consequently, the purpose of providing trauma narratives to children is split between a desire for the protection of innocence and a need for children to grow up which may, I speculate, reflect a real conflict in parental thought. I read Smith's comments in particular as overall detrimental to the potential of the child to survive life's difficulties without a helping hand from the apparently superior adult, this is a fact of life for many of Wilson's characters.

I consider that whether one reads the trauma narrative from the perspective of Smith or Tribunella, there is one uniform motive: the presentation of a "model of recovery". Either recovery leads to maturity or it is brought about through the help and guidance of a trusted and knowing adult who leads the innocent and/or ignorant child into safety and knowledge. In any case I consider this model in danger of undermining the child. Wilson, I argue in the chapters

that follow, subverts this through acknowledging that people do not always recover or at least do not recover quickly. While recovery may be somewhat synonymous with a renewed strength, to say that this is always the case is dishonest and ironically gives the impression that young readers are not equipped to deal with such realities. Furthermore, Wilson's ambiguous endings suggest that books should not provide such easy (and happy) conclusions to life's problems as this is also unrealistic. Such assertions I develop with reference to Sonya Hartnett, who writes that to sugar coat endings is to insult an audience that is "considerably tougher than many imagine" (11).

This thesis is split into three sections each focusing on an individual novel. The novels were selected based on the way in which they engage with difficult issues pertinent to growing up and more specifically growing up as a girl. Drawing on work within the field of trauma studies (which combines psychoanalysis with psychology), my first chapter analyses Wilson's rendering of adolescent self-harm and suicide in *Falling Apart* (1989). I consider the way in which the protagonist deals with traumatic experience and the potential of this narrative to get readers thinking about these issues. Along similar lines, my second chapter, which focuses on *Girls under Pressure* (1998), looks at the way in which readers are invited to critically engage with the subject of eating disorders in ways which, hopefully, avoid the danger of replication. I present the ways in which the protagonist is afflicted by her illness and how she is ultimately able to overcome its difficulties. The focus text of my final chapter is considerably different in that it deals with the mental illness of a mother rather than that of the protagonists. *The Illustrated Mum* (1999), I argue, is a narrative that is more favourable to the child's abilities rather than the adult's. This stems from its critical and realistic portrayal of home, family, and fairy tales which, in the wake of such writers as Jack Zipes, are revealed to be traditional vessels of dominant ideologies in society. Overall, these three chapters are bound by a central argument that focuses on the young protagonist's ability to push through the difficulties inherent in the

process of growing up and their ability to do so in a way that does not perpetuate the overall superiority of adult characters.

Part of my motivation in writing this thesis is to address what I see as a gap in the study of children's and young adult literature. The paucity of in depth critical analysis of Jacqueline Wilson's novels, given their extent and popularity, is disappointing. Nicholas Tucker, a scholar in the field of children's literature, has written on Wilson (see for example, his chapter in *Family Fictions*) but his work is a broader overview of her books and the representation of families. His work is an encouraging start but more in depth critical analysis is needed. In writing this thesis I wish to make evident my opinion that Wilson's novels merit further study because of the ways in which they complicate and subvert the above mentioned representation of childhood and adolescent experience.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A note on the use of "child" and "adolescent"/ "young adult" in this thesis. At points my work may appear to conflate these but this is not unintentional. The conflation is with reference to the awkward position I see many of Wilson's characters holding: not quite child and not quite teenage both physically and/or psychologically. I also make reference to the fact that young adult literature is often read by both children and adolescents.

**1.****The Dual Wound: Psychological Trauma and Physical Harm in *Falling Apart***

The focus of this chapter is Jacqueline Wilson's novel, *Falling Apart* (1989). The title of the novel succinctly expresses its theme, namely, that this is a book that deals with loss and its emotional consequences: loss of a twin brother, mother, and boyfriend. The novel opens with the protagonist, fifteen-year-old Tina, describing what she believes will be her last night alive. After breaking up with her boyfriend, Simon, Tina decides that she no longer wants to live and plans to kill herself by taking a large amount of pills. On the surface, Tina's actions seem to be a simple teenage cry for attention; however, Tina's issues go much deeper than this. At seven-years-old, Tina lost her twin brother, Tim, when he fell from a tree and died. Tina feels an immense amount of guilt, believing that she is responsible for Tim's death as she dared him to climb to a point where the branches were unable to support him. She also feels that she has lost a part of herself as she and Tim shared a special bond and were best friends. It is not particularly surprising then, when she becomes strongly attached to Simon who closely resembles her dead brother. The two begin a relationship and Tina quickly falls in love; however, Simon does not share the same feelings and breaks up with her. After this, and when Tina learns that Simon only went out with her initially because his friend dared him to, Tina breaks down and eventually attempts to commit suicide. It is only at the end of the book, when she is in hospital, that she begins to feel that perhaps she is a whole person even without a brother or boyfriend. However, this epiphany and its result on Tina's future behaviour remain ambiguous.

This chapter participates in and works with psychoanalytic and psychological discourse on trauma studies. My focus is on the complexities implicit in Wilson's rendering of traumatic

subject matter and of the rendering of trauma in general. In the first section of this chapter, I unpack trauma theory and apply it to representations and readings of trauma narratives for children and adolescents. Here, I consider how authorial and parental intention may be undercut by an individual's personal reading of texts. The following sections consider youth self-harm and suicide and the impact of relationships and identity formation on such actions. Overall, the objective of this chapter is to demonstrate how Wilson's work can be aligned with trauma studies and theory on children's and young adult trauma narratives.

Before moving on with a discussion of trauma studies and trauma narratives, I wish to briefly preface my analysis by stating my position with regards to the reading of such narratives. In writing this chapter, I have attempted to avoid conflating the reading of trauma narratives with the trauma of reading or else, using them interchangeably. I acknowledge that the reading of trauma narratives may be a traumatic experience for some, but this is not my ultimate aim. Rather, my focus is on how Wilson represents traumatic experience and how specific readings of traumatic subjects may move (particularly impressionable) young people to think about important issues and act in certain ways without necessarily becoming traumatised themselves.

### *Trauma Studies and the Reading of Trauma*

Trauma, in its most basic of definitions, is described as a wound, traditionally physical but additionally, and importantly here, one that is inflicted on the mind as the result of disturbing stimuli. While trauma studies frequently focuses on memory and renderings of war and the Holocaust,<sup>3</sup> the effects of trauma are felt in relation<sup>3</sup> to a variety of experiences. For example, Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" cites the loss of a loved one as a frequent cause of mourning (243) and a commonly experienced site of trauma. In the case of the experience of

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Judith Lewis Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992)

death in particular, Caruth notes “the uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those that passed through them” (*Unclaimed* 1). Repetition is a common theme in trauma studies. Even before it has been relived in the mind of those it haunts, the trauma of death is experienced in a variety of ways. Primarily, and at first, in the initial infliction: death itself. Secondly, in the way in which those left behind choose to deal with the trauma which may manifest in further mental or physical destruction. This last feature of trauma I source from Freud who writes of the “lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (244). This abuse of the self in response to trauma will make itself apparent in my discussion of *Falling Apart*.

Caruth’s work centres on repetition and forced re-enactment of traumatic events. Caruth writes that “in its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (*Unclaimed* 11). These other intrusive phenomena consist of the reliving of events through dreams or nightmares. Trauma is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (*Unclaimed* 4). The recognition of this pattern also occurs in scientific discourse within the field of psychology. Referring to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)<sup>4</sup>, McNally suggests that the disorder is comprised of a number of symptoms including “having recurrent intrusive recollections and dreams about the trauma and suddenly acting and feeling as if it were happening again (‘flashbacks’). Rather

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<sup>4</sup>Trauma was given this name by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. Prior to this, it was termed “shellshock”. The label of PTSD acknowledges that there are other circumstances (witnessing death and experiencing sexual violence among other triggers) that can cause such a reaction, not simply the experience of war.

than merely remembering the trauma, sufferers seemed to relive it again and again as if it were happening in the present” (8). The fact that common readings of trauma impact span multiple disciplines (psychoanalysis and psychology for example) emphasises the validity of this reading. Traumatic experience occurs primarily in consciousness. Traumatic repetition on the other hand, as marked by Freud and Caruth<sup>5</sup>, is experienced within the space of the unconscious mind. Trauma as an unconscious experience will play an important part in my analysis later in this chapter.

The obvious complexities of understanding trauma within scholarship are mirrored in the difficulties present in the representation of trauma in narratives. Alan Gibbs suggests that writers have attempted to mimic the effects of trauma through the use of “fragmented narratives, characterised by analepses; digressions, diversions, and prevarications in narrative trajectory; and dispersal or fragmenting of narrating personae” (17). However, he, along with other critics, suggest the ultimate impossibility of the trauma narrative. For example, Caruth puts it bluntly when she claims that “literature and language, and even consciousness in general, [are] cut off from historical reality” (*Unclaimed* 74). Despite these assertions, Caruth’s writing is, at points, contradictory. Her work suggests the impossibility of representing trauma while simultaneously emphasising a theory of belatedness. This theory is congruous with reading if one considers that reading is an act that is contextually removed from the original trauma, occurring later and in a separate space. Secondly, trauma, as it is later remembered by the conscious and unconscious mind, is bound to suffer from reality distortion and thus in turn is connected with literature which can never wholly convey the truth. Gibbs also betrays his criticism of representation when he writes that “dissociation of traumatic experience occurs as the trauma is occurring. . . Many trauma survivors report that they automatically are removed

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<sup>5</sup> Other relevant scholars who are not mentioned in the body of this thesis include, Kirby Farrell (1998), Marita Nadal, and Monica Calvo (2014) and Michele Balaev (2008).

from the scene, they look at it from a distance or disappear altogether. . .” (12). If this is the case, if the original sufferer of trauma is removed psychologically from the trauma, then their position in relation to the experience moves closer to that of the reader’s.

Putting this criticism aside, writers such as Gibbs do not suggest that language and texts should be abandoned as a means of expressing traumatic experience. Geoffrey Hartman has added to the above arguments, writing that

Disjunction between experiencing (phenomenal or empirical) and understanding (thoughtful naming, in which words replace things or their images) is what figurative language expresses and explores. The literary construction of memory is obviously not a literal retrieval but a statement of a different sort. (“Traumatic Knowledge” 540)

However, and despite these contentions, it is undesirable to debunk language and literature and to argue that both are not a device by which trauma sufferers may come to terms with and express their experiences. It is, in other words, both “a will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud. . .” (Herman 1). Accepting of the trauma narrative but arguing against the possibility of representation, Gibbs describes a model of transmission whereby texts “should seek to transmit affect onto the reader rather than attempt to represent or recreate the trauma” (28). In suggesting this however, he acknowledges further alternative criticism that suggests that “transmissibility is no more possible than representation” and that “transmission of affect onto a reader that a trauma narrative may perform will vary so much depending on context and the disposition of the reader that to suggest it somehow mimics the original experience of trauma is deeply problematic” (28). In response to this, I have my own suggestions for what I see as the problem with transmission of affect. These problems, I go on to argue in the below, consist of the possible creation of a space of pity and of the vicarious experience of other people’s trauma.

Gibbs writes further that there is a “notion that a reader can vicariously share the experience of the original sufferer” adding that this idea may “elide the actual difficulties inherent in the notion of transmission” (30). The possibility of a reader’s vicarious experience is one of the central issues I have with Gibbs’ transmissibility. But first I step back to the concept of “transmission of affect.” The first problem I have with affect is the possible creation of a space of pity. By this I mean that rather than communicating the trauma as a whole, such transmission may result in simple feelings of pity for the sufferer rather than an improved understanding of the trauma itself, sympathy thus replacing the more active position of empathy. Feelings such as pity can also be rather fleeting, leaving the reader with no real gain in the end. A second problem that is more closely related to vicarious experience is the idea of a form of narcissistic identification. The idea that sharing in the experiences of those who have suffered real trauma and the incorporation of traumatic feelings into one’s own psyche, may lead to self-reflection on one’s own (relatively minor) problems. While such identification and understanding may prove beneficial to those who may have suffered similar trauma, such a model may not be the best in other cases. This may be especially applicable to children and adolescents who will read trauma narratives differently from the adults who write and disseminate literature. Consequently, the next question to ask here is why adults offer such narratives to young readers.

Katherine Capshaw Smith notes that “the contemporary upswing in trauma narratives for children suggests something about our attraction to offering young people stories that chronicle pain” (117). A central topic of discussion she points to is that “we no longer have the luxury of denying evil or postponing the child’s confrontation with such” (117) and such is one of the motives behind this “upswing”. While I argue that it is unlikely there has ever been such a time in history where children have been completely shielded, the proliferation of media (film, television, internet) in recent decades has given easier access to spectacles of horror and

violence, both real and fictional. With this being the case, the censorship of trauma in modern children's literature has been rendered fairly void of purpose. On top of this is the point that exposure to narratives, whether in books, films, television or other media, has shifted the site of trauma with certain narratives becoming the central source by which young readers/audiences come to understand traumatic experience.

This may be tied to Smith's further arguments on trauma narratives for children. Smith provides some opposing views on the way adults imagine children and trauma. On the one hand children are figured as innocent, "the ultimate victims of trauma, those who require above all else adult protection and guidance . . . Alternately, because children are imagined as innocent, they are also figured as the survivors of trauma, those who can offer adults spiritual advice. . ." (116). In any case, Smith goes on to add that "the adult is somewhat reassured about the damage that trauma can do to the 'innocent' child" either because the child is reliant on an adult, or otherwise, because a model of resilience and strength in the face of adversity is provided. Smith's arguments both do and do not make sense. I find the figure of the child "who can offer spiritual advice on how to triumph over pain through simple, honest essential values like love, trust, hope and perseverance" difficult to come to grips with. Instead I argue that it makes more sense to say that parents, teachers, or adults in general, simply want children to come to terms with certain traumatic experiences, to learn essential values, and to grow up. Eric Tribunella also questions the meaning behind presenting young people with trauma narratives. He considers the purpose of the trauma novel as a means of toughening up:

We want children to grow up into mature adults who are prepared to deal with the brutalities of life. . . Trauma is therefore represented in them as beneficial, a kind of inoculation by which the toxicity is introduced into the life of the child in order to help the child develop a resistance to extratextual realities. (xii)

As is the case with Smith, Tribunella's observations invite debate. Citing Smith's above reasons for the use of trauma in children's literature, Tribunella proposes

that a third way to understand the relationship between childhood and trauma is in terms of use – the use of trauma to discipline the child, to encourage or compel the child to move toward or attain maturation as defined by and requiring discipline. (xiv)

I contend that it is unlikely that discipline is a common motive behind exposing children to trauma narratives, at least not in the modern day. Furthermore, while trauma narratives may provide some sort of “inoculation,” trauma itself is not always followed by resilience – in some cases it is quite the opposite but the distinction is not made by Tribunella. In fact, where trauma narratives do not present a protagonist that is resilient, the moral to “toughen up” is lost.

With regards to Wilson's work specifically, I argue that there is no discernible disciplining motive in her writing. Furthermore, considering *Falling Apart* in particular here, there also appears to be no clear model of recovery which would suggest that Wilson has the intention to get children to grow up and toughen up faster in line with adult expectations. This is not to imply that such an outcome is not possible, as a clear lack of censorship and attempt to shelter readers from the brutalities of life may lead to this. Nevertheless, the position I take throughout this thesis is that Wilson's central motive is to draw attention to the realities of being a child and adolescent and to honestly address the particularly difficult times faced by some during these periods. It is impossible to suggest both that children will get through these with ease and that they will also recover with ease. In following the realistic intentions of the novel, I argue, it makes the most sense for Wilson's protagonist to appear not entirely recovered at the end of the story. I unpack the subject of a “model of recovery” further within this chapter and those that follow.

*“Falling Apart” and the Phantom of Trauma*

‘Yes, but this dream – it was like it was happening again . . . he just went on falling and falling, it went on forever. . . (272-273)

The previous section dealt with the subject of the reading of trauma in general. In this next, I want to elucidate the subject of traumatic experience as it is represented in Wilson’s novel, *Falling Apart*. This novel presents a clear narrative of a difficult childhood/adolescent experience and is thus a critical work for the analysis of trauma in children’s and young adult fiction. The central traumatic experience takes side stage to the explicit narrative focus: the failed romance, a common subject of young adult fiction which reflects one of the painful but mostly fleeting experiences of teenage life. Woven in and beneath this story nevertheless, is a darker past that is resurrected and repeated throughout the book.

As in Wilson’s other novels, *Falling Apart* is a first person narrative centring specifically on the life of fifteen-year-old Tina Brown. Haunting Tina’s experiences and behaviour is the death of her twin brother, an event which she continues to feel responsible for. At the opening of the book Tina is preparing to commit suicide. In the first chapter, prior to her attempt, Tina sits in the living room eating fish and chips with her family. She ponders death and laments over how she is spending her final night alive. “It’s not fair. She wants this last evening of her life to be tremendous and tragic. It’s so awful frittering it away on cod and chips and a silly row with Dad” (7). The decision to commit suicide stems from breaking up with her older boyfriend, Simon, who, it is revealed later, does not return Tina’s love. At first glance, Tina’s reason for attempting suicide seem trivial compared with what else she has been through in her life. Primarily, it appears as a teenage cry for attention: Tina thinks about her brother, but in relation to how he was/is more loved by their mother; Tina wishes the last hours of her life were more “tremendous and tragic”; Tina wonders how she should look when she dies, her

hair, her makeup, her nightdress: “it’s plain white which seems more suitable” (10). Tina’s actions do appear self-centred and superficial, an example of foolish reasons for committing suicide at fifteen, and to a degree they are. However, her intentions project beyond the obvious to a deeper fear of loss and rejection.

Tina first meets (ex) boyfriend Simon when walking to school one day. It is Simon’s best friend, Adam, who first draws attention to the boys, but Tina quickly becomes more interested in Simon. It is soon clear that her specific attraction to Simon is not unfounded. According to descriptions, Simon and Tina’s brother are similar in physical appearance. In the cemetery where Tina and Simon go to be together, Tina shows Simon Tim’s grave and says “I wish you could see his photograph. Because I think if he’d have lived he’d have grown up a bit like you” (70). Later in the story Tina also tells her sister Jan, “It’s almost like I’ve found Tim again” (97). Tina’s attraction appears to represent a desire for renewed wholeness. Originally part of a pair of twins, Tina now feels as though she is only half a person. Therefore, her relationship with Simon is representative of trying to fill the gap that has been left since the death of Tim, in effect he is a replacement: “I’d remember I’m just me, not a twin. But that’s changed too. Because now I’ve got Simon to think about, Simon and me” (97). In her guilt over Tim’s death and determination to return to a state of being “complete”, Tina gives herself to Simon and is broken, yet again, when the relationship fails. This failure represents a repetition of the trauma of Tim’s death, a trauma that Tina has now lost her resilience to.

Writers such as Barbara Tannert-Smith have argued that “we demand that children recover from trauma – and recover quickly – and our narratives enforce that process” (396). She goes on to suggest that “this assertion seems uniquely relevant in the young adult novel in which narratives emphasize the ‘recovery’ of adolescent protagonists as part of a larger coming of age trope.” This argument for quick recovery and maturation has been made by other authors such as Tribunella and may be applicable to many texts; however, with regards to Wilson’s

novel, I suggest that there is no clear emphasised model of recovery which would establish the narrative as a coming of age *Bildungsroman*. Instead, the protagonist is doomed to repeat the death of her brother and to seek the ultimate end and antithesis of recovery: suicide. While Tina's suicide attempt here is more explicitly to do with the end of her and Simon's relationship, as suggested earlier, the roots of Tina's feelings go much deeper. During their relationship, Tina tells Simon of how she used to harm herself as a child:

‘I just wanted to hurt myself. I used to cut my nails really short too, you know the way it makes them feel all raw and sore. And once I got the scissors and tried to stab myself . . . Because of Tim, my brother. Because he died and I didn't.’ (122-123)

From this it is clear that Tina's guilt over the death of her brother has led her to think about death even at a very young age. Her desire to hurt herself expresses a desire not to recover from trauma which stems from a kind of survivor's guilt. In relation to the suffering of trauma, Freud asserts that one of the distinguishing mental features of melancholia is “a delusional expectation of punishment” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 244). In the case of Tina, and others, this punishment is turned inwards in acts of masochism, a point reiterated by Greg Forster who writes that the “ego stands in the permanent grip of ‘mysterious masochistic trends’ which lead it to seek out suffering and pain rather than try to shun them” (267). This can reflect both feelings of guilt<sup>6</sup> and/or the inability to escape repetition of traumatic experiences as they are relived within the subject's un/consciousness. It lastly may also represent an attempt to return to her brother through death. The act of wounding herself as Tim was wounded re-establishes the likeness and connection with her twin, a point I return to in my next chapter when I discuss

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<sup>6</sup> Survivors of traumatic occurrences may face the guilt of having lived while others have not. Documentation of this often regards experiences of war. See for example Richard J. McNally's *Remembering Trauma* (2003) and Judith Lewis Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), who writes: “Feelings of guilt are especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people. To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate creates a severe burden of conscience. Survivors of disaster and war are haunted by images of the dying whom they could not rescue” (54).

the way in which Ellie's disorder may reflect a desire to reconnect with her dead mother. Not only may these acts of masochism manifest physically but they are also present in the return of the sufferer to the scene of the initial trauma.

Tina's suicide attempt, in part, stems from a desire for self-erasure. This is presented in the first chapter when Tina is in her mother's room attempting to talk to her about Tim. Picking up a jar of face cream she considers the disappearance of herself: "Vanishing Cream? She thinks of smoothing it on, smoothing and smoothing until the skin of her face is smoothed right away, sliver by sliver. Smoothed sheer down to the skull"<sup>7</sup> (8). Tina's desire for self-erasure, for the disappearance of her physical self, represents two things. First, her loss of identity as part of a pair that is now missing both Tim and Simon. Secondly, it suggests a loss of an adolescent identity that places importance in physical appearance. Fragile adolescent identity, characterised by self-worth and physical self-worth in particular, may become tarnished in the wake of a traumatic experience. Judith Lewis Herman discusses the effects of trauma and the damage inflicted on the self, writing that: "Long after the event, many traumatised people feel that a part of themselves has died. The most profoundly afflicted wish that they were dead" (49). Such an opinion is clearly visible in *Falling Apart*. As part of a set of twins, Tim's death represents the death of a part of Tina's self. While this trauma alone does not trigger Tina's serious attempt at killing herself, it does lead to self-destructive behaviours and when loss is repeated, this is what tips Tina over the edge. Herman writes further that "A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self" (52). Tim's death is responsible for the loss of normal attachment/connection between both Tina and herself, and

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<sup>7</sup> These words mirror those of another adolescent protagonist in another trauma narrative. In Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999), Melinda says "I wash my face in the sink until there is nothing left of it, no eyes, no nose, no mouth. A slick nothing" (45). Like Tina, Melinda engages in self-destructive behaviours such as cutting rather than speaking out and seeking help after the traumatic experience of being raped.

Tina and another. Tina does not actually lose the ability to form attachments as a consequence but the security of new attachments is compromised. This is apparent in her insecure attachment and clinginess towards Simon.

As suggested earlier, Tina's relationship with Simon acts as a kind of stand in for the loss of relationship with her brother. Simon therefore acts as a replacement of the part of Tina's self once filled by Tim, a part she has been unable to fill with her own being. According to Rollin and West, "fragmentation of the personality is actually a fairly common phenomenon during periods of regression" (19), but, in the case of Tina, it is clear that her sense of self has always been fragmented, divided between herself and her brother. Tina's subsequent attachment to Simon represents further regression into this fragmented state whereby she again requires another person to make her feel "whole". This fact is reiterated near the end of the novel when Simon breaks up with Tina and she tries desperately to hold on to him. Simon asks, "Haven't you – I don't know – got any pride?" to which Tina replies, "I haven't got anything . . . I just want you" (242). Tina's words represent further her feelings of loss and fragmentation. If she does lack pride it is because this is a part of her that has been lost, a part that requires another person. Tina's lack of pride indicates that her personality development has been compromised by the loss of connection with her brother and consequent loss of self which is replayed with the end of her and Simon's relationship. The struggles faced by trauma survivors, difficulties with "autonomy, initiative, competence, identity and intimacy" (Herman 52), may all be observed in Tina's behaviour subsequent to Tim's death.

Tina's wish for self-erasure is not helped by the apparent erasure of herself in her mother's thoughts and memories. Tina's mother hardly speaks throughout the novel. Like Tina she is traumatised by the death of her "pride and joy, my only boy" (2) and Tina is unable to remember a time before "Mother lost her Pride" (2), a specific form of self-loss that structures this complicated mother-daughter paradigm. What appears to be Tina's mother's favouritism

of her only boy leads Tina to the belief that she is least loved of the two. This is not aided by the fact that her mother holds a cut in half photo of the twins in her handbag, the Tina half having been discarded: “Mum snipped her out of the photograph in her handbag. She probably edits her out of the private films in her head. Tina’s the smudgy space beside Tim, the shadow behind him” (5-6). This view of herself as a smudge or shadow rather than a person is indicative of Tina’s lack of identity and her position as the lesser of two halves<sup>8</sup>.

The issue of fragmentation, the torn photograph and its relationship to the self and memory is on par with Hillary Chute’s analysis of comics or graphic novels in relation to memory. Chute writes how

images in comics appear as they do in actual recollection; this fragmentation, in particular, is a prominent feature of traumatic memory. The art of crafting words and pictures together into a narrative punctuated by pause or absence, as in comics, also mimics memory. (4)

Chute’s point suggests that images represent a fixed point in time, reflecting memory which may also be transfixed at the point of trauma. Secondly, the idea of punctured narrative may be analogous with the experience of trauma as it punctures/interferes with everyday life. Although the above refers to comic representation, the idea of fragmentation may also be applied to photographs which are often seen as more real than drawings. In the case of *Falling Apart*, the chopped photograph represents first, the fragmentation of Tina’s identity as a result of Tim’s death and secondly, provides an incomplete view of an event. Just as memory is always fragmented and missing in details, the photograph, albeit sometimes used as a memory

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<sup>8</sup> There is a similar yet different representation of relationships and identity in Katherine Paterson’s novel, *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980). Paterson’s protagonist, Sara Louise, also suffers from feelings of inferiority and believes that her parents love her beautiful and talented twin sister, Caroline, more than her. Sara Louise harbours feelings of hatred and bitterness towards her sister which prevent her from developing as an individual and doing what she wants as she appears to be too busy being angry at her sister and trying to prove herself to her family. Fortunately for Sara Louise, near the end of the novel, her mother tells her that she will be missed more than her sister, words that “allowed me at last to leave the island and begin to build myself as a soul, separate from the long, long shadow of my twin” (228). Tina is never granted this same freedom.

aide, will never show the full picture. This expresses the complex situation whereby imagery, words, and memory are never able to fully articulate trauma and yet such words and images continue to be used as vessels for the repetition and transmission of traumatic experience.

With further regards to photography, Petra Rau has written that this medium has the potential to produce

trauma-like effects because it always documents a moment of loss by subjectively inscribing an absence into the image (a negative supplement as it were) For Barthes' punctum<sup>9</sup> to occur, the spectator responds unpredictably to a partial object in the totality of the picture . . . spectators react to precisely what is not in the picture – to a synecdochal, painfully obscure representation. (297-298)

In the case of *Falling Apart*, Tina responds both to the literal and symbolic absence of herself in the photograph. Not only has she been physically cut from the photograph but she understands the absence of herself in the photograph as representative of her mother's lack of care, something that brings further pain to her situation.

In the wake of Tina's broken and twisted identity as the smudgy shadow twin, I argue that Tim represents, in relation to his sister, a loss of innocence. In the above photo Tim is described as "smiling angelically, the damp spray making his curls stand up like a golden halo" (257). Tim is represented as the innocent part of Tina, a part that has been lost with his death. However, in Tina's subsequent nightmares she describes how

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<sup>9</sup> In his 1980 text *Camera Lucida*, Barthes posits the definition of the punctum as a detail or "partial object" (43) within a photograph which a viewer responds to. The punctum, Barthes' also suggests, "is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27). This definition is apt for a discussion of trauma and the sometimes traumatic impact that photographs may have.

his face is the little boy Tim's, a sweet seven-year-old, although the rosininess of his cheek looks raddled, the golden curls look too careful to be real hair. The aging child's face is on a disconcertingly thick neck, with a man's Adam's apple straining at the skin. (127-128)

Tina's nightmare thus demonstrates both recognition, denial, and fear of loss of innocence. Her desire to return to the past and a happy childhood is coupled with the need to grow up and move on, symbolised by the straining Adam's apple. Furthermore, the representation of Tim as an adult connects further to Tina's guilt that she is able to mature while he will remain a child forever. Relevantly, this chapter is preceded by one in which Tina loses her virginity, another form of loss of innocence. Thus Tim's intrusion into her dreams, specifically in the form of a grown man, may stem from the guilt of replacing him with the older Simon who, quite literally, fills a void inside Tina.

One of the most explicit examples of Tina's guilt and trauma comes in the form of forced repetition in Tina's dream life. As has been mentioned earlier "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 11). This is exemplified in the haunting of Tina's dreams, where she is forced to relive the trauma of her brother's death during a nightmare in which his spectre visits:

'It still hurts', he hisses into her face. 'It hurts and hurts. You must always remember how much I'm hurting.'

'I don't want to remember!'

'I shall make you,' he says, and he rips his robe open so she sees the terrible gaping wound. His blood spatters her and she screams. (128)

Tina's dream represents her ongoing guilt at Tim's death and her simultaneous need to remember and desire to forget the past. The spectre's demand that she must always remember his hurt and the exposition of the wound, which is now a visible physical trauma to the body, is mirrored in Tina's own mental trauma and physical attempts at hurting herself, to reiterate, a form of survivor's guilt and subsequent punishment of the self. The spectral Tim's action of forcing her to look and remember reflects the experience of trauma induced amnesia and the recovery of traumatic memories from within the unconscious mind. Barbara Tannert-Smith posits that "the term 'trauma' comes from the Greek word for 'wound,' *Traum* is also German for dream . . ." (405, emphasis in original). This link to dream life coincides with and is possibly the inspiration behind Caruth's theory of the nature of trauma and its unconscious repetition. Wilson's description of the "terrible gaping wound" also exposes us to the initial site of trauma as something physical and something repeated when Tina attempts to stab herself with a pair of scissors. It is not made evident in other descriptions that Tim sustained any open wound like that described in Tina's dream. Regardless of this, it is possible that Tina's mind exaggerated the impact of the fall, a reflection of the gaping wound/trauma that exists within her mind as a result.

*The Woman in the Chair: Depictions of the Mother-Daughter Relationship*

As mentioned in the introduction, another area of interest in this thesis is the subject of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship in Wilson's work. While this subject is a more dominant part of my third chapter, I wish to discuss the mechanics of this relationship as it exists in *Falling Apart* and examine what implications this has for Tina. In the previous section I mentioned how the rather removed relationship between Tina and her mother influences Tina's sense of self and self-worth. Here, I further discuss the apparent complicity of the mother in her daughter's development.

Carolyn Daniel argues that “implicit in Wilson’s discourse is the notion that being a wife and a mother is a woman’s only role/function. Failure to perform this role satisfactorily results in depression and exclusion from society” (103)<sup>10</sup>. Unlike Marigold (the specific subject of Daniel’s analysis) in *The Illustrated Mum*, Tina’s mother is not given a name, she is simply “Mum”. While it is not uncommon for parents to be referred to only as “Mum and Dad” in the space of children’s and young adult literature, this namelessness suggests that she does, and will not, have any other identity throughout the novel. Mother certainly seems to have lost her pride, as Tina observes on the second page, and her sense of purpose following the death of her only son. Lost in her grief, Tina’s mother spends most of her day sitting in front of the television watching soap operas. She interacts infrequently with her family and, by no longer working, contributes nothing to the household financially as well as socially and emotionally. When Tina’s sisters, Louise and Jan, attempt to make Tina feel less to blame for Tim’s death, they instead implicate their mother: it’s “Mum’s fault for not coming to the playground with us. I think that’s half the reason she never gets over it. Because she blames herself” (273). Although Jan’s words are presumably not intended to point the finger there may be the belief that their mother did not do her duty (as she was attending to unnamed, possibly not mother related things). Following Daniel’s argument, she has failed in her primary role causing her collapse into depression and withdrawal from society.

Marilee Strong writes that society has a tendency to blame mothers when their children engage in self-destructive behaviours. In this culture of mother blaming “self-mutilation may be not so much self-punishment as it is a way to punish the rejecting mother” (47). This cultural belief probably stems from the fact that mothers are typically primary caregivers of children, often seen as the biggest influence in their child’s development and thus easiest to blame when things go wrong. Strong argues further that when a child feels emotionally abandoned, self-

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<sup>10</sup> I return to this argument when discussing motherhood and mental illness in my final chapter.

harm “is a means of self-soothing and in that sense can be viewed as a flawed attempt at self-mothering” (48). These feelings of emotional abandonment are evident in *Falling Apart* in which Tina’s mother seems unable or even unwilling to give emotional support to Tina because of her own emotional pain. Because of this Tina’s self-harm and eventual suicide attempt may be multidimensional<sup>11</sup>, representing guilt, therapy, and an attempt to reach out to her mother.

Unfortunately for Tina, this attempt fails as her mother meets her actions with anger:

‘How could you do such a thing, Tina! If people ever find out what on earth will they think? How do you think it makes *us* feel? And it’s so unfair! I’ve fought for years and years against doing it myself. I’ve wanted to die, God knows, but I’ve forced myself to go on for you girls. And then this is what you do the first sign of trouble . . . How could you be so *selfish*?’ (262 emphases in original)

This reaction marks the mother’s inability to recognise her daughter’s pain. The selfishness that she accuses Tina of is turned back on her as Tina’s mother cannot see past what everyone else will think, and that she herself, has considered suicide. The discovery that the mother has considered suicide as well as suffering from depression may further position her within a culture of mother blaming. Not only had she first failed to protect her son from death but she was consequently unable to muster the resilience to be there for her daughters afterward. Regardless of authorial intention, such a construction of the mother may implicate Wilson in this culture of mother blaming. However, as this cannot be verified, I choose to take the position, as I do elsewhere in this thesis, that Wilson is displaying sympathy with the child/adolescent in her portrayal of the mother. This is in keeping with a long line of negative, blocking, or abandoning adults who are not just mothers, but also fathers and other caregivers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This multidimensionality, I hope, acknowledges that the mother is not wholly to blame for her daughter’s behaviour although her inaction certainly does not help matters.

<sup>12</sup> A few other relevant titles from this author include: *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (1991) in which Tracy has been placed into foster care as a result of an absent mother, father, and adoptive parents who give her up when they have their own children. Also, *Love Lessons* (2005), which contains a possessive father who prevents his

This is the case with *Falling Apart* in which the father is also unable to be there for his daughters as he should.

Without further wishing to mark Wilson as complicit in a culture of mother blaming, it is fair to say that Tina's mother, as with many, is an influence in her daughter's development.

Judith Herman writes that:

the development of a child's positive sense of self depends upon a caretaker's benign use of power. When a parent, who is so much more powerful than a child, nevertheless shows some regard for that child's individuality and dignity, the child feels valued and respected; she develops self-esteem. (52).

Again, Tina does not receive this same regard from her mother who does little to recognise and respect Tina as an individual. Tina herself thinks this: her mother speaks to her but never looks at her directly, "she never does. She addresses a space beside her" (228). This space can be read as a space that Tina's mother sees as inhabited by Tina's brother. Tina's mother thus fails, at least in Tina's mind, to treat her as an individual, deserving of separate respect and not simply "one of the twins" (261). Tina's lack of a sense of self and self-esteem is again compromised by the behaviour of her mother. Yet again, the mother is implicated in her child's troubled development and fragile sense of self.

Approaching Wilson's text from a different perspective and one I return to in my final chapter, I lastly want to briefly suggest a theory which would remove the narrative from a primarily mother blaming culture. In recent decades, theory within the field of psychology has focused on changing family dynamics, child and parent roles, and a breakdown of the "ideal" nuclear family. Psychologist David Elkind discusses the idea of the "postmodern family" which

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daughters' assimilation into the real world. And *Lola Rose* (2003) which contains an abusive father and a mother who takes some time to remove herself and her children from their violent home.

is characterised by a shift from the needs of the child to the needs of the parent (3). While I do not feel that Tina's parents can be read as purely self-serving, I have argued that there is clear sense of emotional neglect in the story as the parents struggle with their own problems. While nuclear in the sense of a household containing two biological parents and children, other important aspects of the nuclear family are clearly missing.<sup>13</sup> While she stays at home and does not work, the mother is far from the stereotypical 1950s busy housewife and the working father barely earns enough to keep the household afloat. In deviating from this traditional nuclear family dynamic in which the emotional and physical needs of the children come first, Wilson can be seen to be contextualising her works within this new postmodern dynamic in which children do not experience all the attention, affection, and protection from their parents that they expect. Elkind writes that the postmodern child is no longer afforded the parental security which was given to children prior to this period (8). It is perhaps this loss of security and support from both parents that are detrimental to Tina.<sup>14</sup>

### *Suicide and the Recovery of the Self*

I have already mentioned how abreaction<sup>15</sup> of trauma may manifest in feelings of masochism or expectation of pain and punishment. Now I look to the subject of suicide and self-harm as it is specifically situated in young adult literature. According to Kimberley Reynolds,

Fiction makes it possible to highlight incidents and draw connections between them and the subsequent feelings and behaviour more rapidly than is usually the case in real life and so to

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<sup>13</sup> The nuclear family, Elkind reiterates, experienced its heyday in the 1950s (5).

<sup>14</sup> In making this point I do not wish to imply that all parents that belong to this "postmodern" period (1960s onwards) were/are apt to put their needs before their children, or neglect their sense of emotional/physical security. Rather, I suggest that, as this was one context in which Wilson was working, her intention may have been to draw attention to the difficulties experienced by children in these postmodern families but without implying that this was a reality for all, or blaming all parents.

<sup>15</sup> A Freudian term defined by Mardi Horowitz in *The Encyclopedia of Psychology Volume One* (2000). Horowitz writes: "Abreaction refers to a clinical phenomenon in which experiences of trauma are recollected often after a period in which they have not occupied conscious attention. During recollection the experience is one of reliving the memory. Intense emotions are often felt and expressed" (5).

provide readers with insights and ways of thinking about what might cause someone to begin self-harming. (109)

Reynolds' argument clearly expresses a certain amount of optimism regarding the ability of literature to get young readers thinking on the subject of self-harm. However, it is not simply a case of providing such narratives, but a case of *how* such narratives are interpreted by young, impressionable readers regardless of authorial, parental and pedagogical intentions. Reynolds' considers this problem, writing that literature may create "opportunities for young people to gain insights into themselves and those around them that may have long-term social and emotional benefits" (89). However, despite having a potentially "therapeutic function," could such books be "helping to normalise such behaviour and so contributing to its increased frequency? Are they participating in the creation of an aesthetic of self-harming?" (107). Reynolds' discussion refers to my issue with representation and transmission of traumatic experience mentioned earlier in this chapter. I argue that there is a problem with the concept of identification and vicarious experience especially where it involves an impressionable adolescent. This stems from the potential for these readers to project the pain of others (in this case characters) onto themselves, a narcissism which could lead them to over-regard their own problems and take similar action in imitation of what they have read.

The normalisation of self-harm and suicide projected within popular culture is particularly concerning when it reaches an easily influenced child or adolescent. While self-harm can be considered a method of coping for some, it can also reflect a desire for attention or mimicry of peers, influential members of society, or fictional characters. For this reason, it is difficult to assess the usefulness of narratives that deal with this subject for helping people understand why they or others may do this to their bodies. The question of whether youth will critique or mimic such texts will always be up for debate by authors such as Reynolds and will be raised again in my following chapter on eating disorders in fiction. Here, I consider how

*Falling Apart* deals with the multidimensional nature of self-harm, as it may be constructed and deconstructed by author and reader.

Tina's self-harm and suicide attempt constitute both a mechanism of coping and a cry for attention. As a mechanism of coping, in the pain that Tina inflicts on her body which acts as a way of dulling the pain she suffers psychologically, she swaps pain for pain. Marilee Strong writes that in the narratives of cutters, "they hurt themselves not really to inflict pain but, astonishingly enough, to relieve themselves of pain, to sooth themselves and purge their inner demons through a kind of ritual mortification of the flesh" (xviii). The infliction of physical wounds on herself as a child represents the exchange of a mental trauma for a physical one. As well as an expression of guilt, physical pain provides Tina with temporary relief from the pain of her brother's death, a way of feeling something else.<sup>16</sup> To forget she participates in pulling her own hair until her scalp throbs, sticking needles in her fingers, and stabbing herself with a pair of scissors. These self-mutilations are not purely about coping with psychological pain but also about coping with the guilt of feeling responsible for her brother's death. These two factors present the multidimensionality of self-harming as it occurs in such narratives. Not only does this constitute a method to forget and be relieved, but a way also to be relieved of guilt which offers a sense of penance for feelings of responsibility.

The second issue with Tina's suicide attempt and in suicide and self-harm as it occurs in fiction and real-life is the problem of attention seeking. Kimberly Reynolds writes that behaviour "imitating plot-lines from popular narratives such as television soaps rather than a response to real stress is not uncommon . . ." (104). While Tina's self-harm and suicide attempt

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<sup>16</sup> The idea of self-mutilation as "therapeutic" occurs in many sources, for example, Jennifer Miskec and Chris McGee's article "My Scars Tell a Story: Self-Mutilation in Young Adult Literature" (2007). Note also, Marilee Strong's *A Bright Red Scream* (2000), in which various forms of self-mutilation are named as "morbid forms of self-help because they provide rapid but temporary relief from distressing symptoms such as mounting anxiety, depersonalization, racing thoughts, and rapidly fluctuating emotions" (xii).

do not derive from a desire to mimic any fictional character, follow the crowd, or become more popular, her behaviour prior to ultimate attempt at suicide shows a need to make an impact in a dramatic manner. In an argument with her father at the beginning of the book Tina thinks: “He’ll think she’s competing with Mum when she commits suicide, to show them she cares too. It’s not fair. She wants this last evening of her life to be tremendous and tragic” (7). Tina’s wish for her death to be tremendous and tragic expresses a cry for attention, a need to be noticed more than her brother and while she worries that her actions will appear as competing with her mother’s sorrow, as demonstrated earlier, it is more directly linked to a need for her mother’s attention which she fights for against the memory of her brother.

Further complicating matters for Tina is the inability of parents to understand the reasons behind their children’s actions. Strong mentions how

in discovering their children’s self-harming, some parents respond with anger and annoyance rather than sympathy and understanding. They overact and police their kids, only driving their symptoms further underground. Other parents underreact, dismissing the cuts, bruises, and broken bones as melodrama- “teenage bullshit,” as one cutter’s father described it<sup>17</sup>. (xix)

These kinds of reactions make it difficult for teenagers wishing to seek help and recover from trauma as they may fear further rejection. In *Falling Apart*, Tina’s early experiences with self-harm go undetected by a silent, withdrawn mother who is trying to cope with her own trauma, and a father who is also wrapped up in his wife’s pain. When Tina is in the hospital at the end of the book Tina’s mother reacts angrily, calling Tina’s actions selfish and pathetic in their reasoning. While Tina’s mother’s angry reaction is understandable, it simultaneously demonstrates her lack of comprehension at the pain Tina has experienced while her mother has attempted to deal with her own feelings. Here, Tina holds the expectation that her mother will

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<sup>17</sup> This is similar to the father’s reaction in *Girls Under Pressure*, discussed in the next chapter.

meet her actions with sympathy and tell her how much she is loved, despite a prior lack of affection. She is again disappointed. Tina's experience further highlights the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship and its influence on identity formation and ways of coping with trauma. While Wilson's rendering of parental reactions to self-harming and suicide may be realistic in some cases, such portrayals could have the harmful impact of reinforcing teenagers' fears about exposing their feelings and actions. In other words, it may provide an adverse model for encouraging children and adolescents to speak up.

Tina's second and more blatantly expressed reason for attempting suicide lies in a desire to gain back Simon's attention and make him feel guilty for abandoning her, a sort of vengeance suicide which may be connected to Tina's own feelings of guilt. Joanne Bernstein mentions his type of suicide, asking

Where can young people read of the vengeance suicide? 'Let this be a lesson to you' is a type of instrumental suicide which adolescents who feel inferior sometimes fantasize, attempt and succeed in accomplishing. In evoking sympathy, the victims try to get back at those who deprive them of self-worth...This type of suicide is missing in today's fiction. (165)

Wilson's novel makes it clear that this type of suicide does exist in young adult fiction. Low self-esteem/ self-worth is a defining cause for the attempt of suicide in adolescence and may be triggered by difficult relationships with peers, boyfriends/girlfriends, or family. However, is demonstrating this type of suicide harmful, potentially teaching young people that this is a normal way to respond when relationships go bad? The question of whether such problem novels influence children and adolescents is one that will repeat itself at other points in this thesis in response to a proliferation of criticism on the topic. In the case of *Falling Apart*, it is difficult to ascertain whether an ultimately good (hope and recovery) or bad message is transmitted in the wake of Tina's actions. In the following, I consider how the ambiguous

ending, marked by Tina's questionable sense of self, further complicates the transmission of a good message.

Possible awareness of the self as a separate entity from another only appears to happen on the penultimate page of the book: "Tina watches as they [Simon and Adam] walk away. She stays at the window, staring into space. She blinks and then notices her own reflection in the glass looking back at her. The other side of herself. So maybe she's been a whole person all along" (207). It takes Tina until her last glimpse of Simon to realise that she is an individual and not in need of another person to make her whole. Judith Herman writes about the damage to the self that trauma may inflict. "A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self" (52). As mentioned earlier, death and other occurrences which result in melancholia may have the impact of fragmenting the personality and damaging the image of the self and the growth of a separate identity, an important part of child and adolescent development. With reference to my earlier analysis, Tina's sense of self was never entirely separate from another prior to the death of her twin brother. However, the trauma of his death lead to the breakage of her sense of shared identity, an identity that could only be renewed when she replaced Tim with Simon. Herman writes later in her book that, "The simple statement- 'I know I have myself' could stand as the emblem of the third and final stage of recovery" (202). Tina's recognition of "the other side of herself" stands for the recovery of her sense of self, as one who does not require another half to make her whole. If Tina's new found "wholeness" is true, then she could be seen to become more of a person than she was before Tim's death.

However, as in the case of photography, mirrors are an example of an object that does not display the full picture, thus complicating the view of the self. In a way the mirror presents Tina with a double of herself, another twin but a twin absent of actual being, as is her deceased

brother. So Tina's mirror image presents a dilemma. It shows her a clear image of what is on the outside but in doing so it detaches this body from what Tina is inside, thus further representing a fractured sense of self. Revealing this suggests that Tina has not entirely found herself nor has she recognised herself as an independent single being. Indeed, after the realisation that she has maybe "been a whole person all along" (277) Tina subsequently appears to revert to her old dependence. Taking a chrysanthemum, she plucks the petals saying "He loves me, he loves me not..." (278). This ending presents the complexity of finding a positive message for recovery in the book. It is true that Tina shows some indication of recovering from her overall traumatic past and the traumatic climax of her story: she displays the knowledge that her sense of self is more whole and less fragmented now, although this knowledge is reflected through a mirror and not explicit. In the end, it seems that Tina is unable to break free from her need for someone else. In this sense Wilson's conclusion breaks the requirement for recovery (also the resolution aspect of a *Bildungsroman*) and an overall happy ending. However, perhaps this is for the best as "real life" is never so simple and linear.

#### *The Wounded Girl and the Question of Recovery*

The above demonstrates the potential difficulties present in the production of trauma narratives. These exist not only in the "appropriate" representation of trauma for young readers, but in how both fictional and real adults are implicated. Traumatic subjects, as suggested in my own and in others' writing, impact on audiences in a variety of ways, although I have avoided too much focus on how texts may themselves traumatise audiences. On a positive note, such literature can show vulnerable audiences that they are not alone in their feelings and experiences. They may also speak to other more privileged audiences, giving them a window into the lives of the less fortunate. However, in the case of Wilson's novel, a model for coping

with trauma and recovering is notably absent.<sup>18</sup> Adversely, as further suggested, there is the idea that the message conveyed in such novels is based on reader interpretation and, in younger audiences, may create nothing more than a shallow narcissistic identification with the subject. It may even trigger copycat behaviours in particularly impressionable readers. However, ultimately I want to suggest that, in the rendering of her protagonist's action and its implications, Wilson is indicating that this is not the right way to deal with one's problems. Part of her suicide attempt is a last ditch effort to get back the love and attention of her mother and Simon. Yet this fails: Simon refuses to enter the hospital and Tina's mother, as mentioned earlier, is exceptionally angry and still refuses to attempt to find out the root of Tina's behaviour.

As argued earlier in this chapter, I believe that the rather absent model of recovery in Wilson's novel is an important feature of realistic fiction and not necessarily a negative point. This is because it is impossible to deny that many young people will not easily spring back after negative experiences or that they will regain a healthy state of mind after they attempt suicide. While not completely hopeless, I do believe that Wilson's fiction represents the idea that hope is not a requirement of children's and young adult fiction. Such a requirement is also dismissed by Sonya Hartnett who writes that young audiences are tough enough to cope without sugar coated endings (11). Young people, she argues, "read books hoping to recognise themselves in the fictional world and they would soon lose patience with fiction that ignored the facts." That Wilson breaks the requirements for a happy ending and does not provide her characters with a positive well rounded resolution to their problems is, in my opinion, one of her successes. It is a challenge to adult expectations of how literature for young people should

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<sup>18</sup> Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* could be read as a more solid narrative of recovery from trauma although, as is normally the case, this opinion is debateable. For a more sceptical reading of this novel see Barbara Tannert-Smiths 2010 article "Like Falling Up into a Storybook': Trauma and Intertextual Repetition in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*."

end (i.e. with the recovery and maturation of the protagonist). Ultimately, it is acknowledgement of the fact that real life problems are not often easily resolved.

It cannot be ignored that realism and hard hitting realistic subject matter is an essential part of children's and young adult literature. Violent or traumatic experience, whether experienced first-hand or vicariously, is an everyday fact for many young people and something that cannot be avoided, especially at a time when youth exposure to such material through media such as television and the internet is greater than ever. However, at the same time, I cannot help but be concerned that Wilson may be prescribing a negative stereotype in her writing: the trope of the wounded adolescent girl. Elizabeth Marshall discusses the idea of the wounded girl, arguing that female adolescence has been imagined as a site of vulnerability to trauma and a period of crisis. She states that there is a "cultural 'truth' that adolescent girlhood and mental illness are naturally entwined" (121). Mental disequilibrium is focused inward, driven by a "cultural pedagogy that teaches girls to turn their anger inward rather than outward, that instructs them to view self-destruction as the only viable option for resistance" (128). Marshall's assertions highlight some issues for consideration when reading Wilson's fiction. These include considering how Wilson's female characters' deal with their problems and the positive and negative implications of this for young, impressionable readers. My next chapter will continue to explore these issues in relation to another form of self-harm which afflicts female adolescents in particular: eating-disorders.

## 2.

### **The Pressures of a Girl Body: Culture, Body Image, Family and Food in *Girls under Pressure***

The focus text for this chapter is Wilson's *Girls under Pressure* (1998), the second in a series that includes the titles: *Girls in Love* (1997), *Girls out Late* (1999) and *Girls in Tears* (2002). The book centres on thirteen-year-old Ellie, an intelligent and creative, yet plain and chubby girl whose experience being called overweight leads to a dangerous obsession with food and dieting. The story begins with Ellie and her two best friends Nadine, a rake thin gothic girl, and Magda, beautiful and curvaceous, coming across a modelling competition at the local shopping centre. Ellie is unwilling but nevertheless drawn into queuing for the photo-shoot. However, when she reaches the front, another girl remarks: "Surely she doesn't think she could make it as a model? She's far too fat!" (19). As expected, Ellie is extremely upset by this insult and becomes determined to lose weight. We learn subsequently that Ellie's overeating began with her mother's death and the need to quell her 'sour' feelings with sweet food. Ellie's obsession with her weight dominates the narrative which focuses on her constant thoughts on food. Her condition spirals out of control; she starves herself to the point of faintness, and engages in bingeing and purging. As the narrative progresses, her family and friends become more aware of Ellie's alternating anorexic and bulimic states and unsuccessfully attempt to stop her behaviour. It is only when another severely anorexic girl from her school, Zoe, ends up in hospital that Ellie sees the dangers of her actions and begins to recover.

In this chapter I begin with a discussion of girlhood, body image and how culture and society is implicated in body image and the production of an ideal female body in particular. I follow this by defining anorexia nervosa and its control over sufferers. My next objective is to

discuss the concept of alienation in adolescence and the idea of the alienated body in particular. I then go on to consider the mother daughter relationship and here I will call on primarily psychoanalytic study<sup>19</sup> which deals specifically with the relationship between child and mother and child and food. These above points may all be considered complicit in the onset of eating disorders. As a result of the variety of issues I am dealing with, I will be involving multiple analytic perspectives, most importantly: feminist psychological and psychoanalytic, post-structuralist, and sociocultural analysis.

In the previous chapter I suggested that the ambiguous ending represents Wilson's attempt to avoid unrealistically happy endings and to not undermine her reader through neat and positive resolutions to her characters' problems. While there is more apparent emphasis on recovery and empowerment in the conclusion of *Girls Under Pressure* compared with that of *Falling Apart*, I argue that this is not to the detriment of the author's ability to portray the struggles faced by the novels' protagonists realistically. Despite recognition of her eating disorder at the end of the narrative, Ellie admits that she cannot be entirely trusted to return to eating as she once did. This, in my opinion, is a more realistic portrayal of the rocky road to recovery although I am still at odds with how quickly Ellie is able to recognise her problem. In my analysis of *Falling Apart* I not only suggested the absence of a model of recovery, but also the possible problem of an easily influenced young reader who may be swayed into mimicry. This potential, I argue, lies in the way in which characters choose to deal with their problems and in how the author chooses to portray this. Later in the chapter I discuss the way in which Wilson is able to acknowledge the danger of mimicry within this novel while also providing opportunities for critique which may counteract this danger.

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<sup>19</sup> Some influential work on this subject includes, among many: Nancy Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Luce Irigaray's "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other" (1981), and Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982).

*Girlhoods, Body Image, and Anorexia Nervosa*

Elizabeth Marshall writes that adolescent girlhood is conceptualised in western culture as “a period of traumatic passage,” a “period of crisis” and vulnerability” (“Borderline Girlhoods” 118). While this reading of female adolescence is rather bleak, it is fair to say that the passage into adulthood can be a tumultuous experience for either sex. In some cases, adolescence may be characterised by some form of identity crisis that stems from the psychological and physical changes associated with this period. For girls these physical changes are more pronounced and, amongst others, include changes in body shape and increases in body fat. The evolution of the girl body into a more adult one precipitates propulsion into a culture fixated on body image, one that places importance in appearance and a specific, idealised female image.<sup>20</sup> Body image, Catherine Driscoll writes, “locates a unified representation of the self, but it is not necessarily stable and never independent of sociocultural definitions of body, image, and self” (238). A relevant example of a cultural platform where body image is projected and defined is the modelling industry, a literal platform which promotes a very obvious but unhealthy image of the female body. Such images may be internalised by female teenagers in particular, who will go on to judge themselves against such bodies. While *Girls under Pressure* is most likely not intended to be a commentary on the effects of model bodies on the easily influenced adolescent girl, modelling and the “ideal” female figure may be taken as catalysts for Ellie’s obsession with size.

Ellie’s anxiety over her weight is triggered by her experience at a modelling talent scout event in the local mall (she has clearly always been self-conscious about her weight but this is

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<sup>20</sup> In western culture this body image is being projected at younger and younger consumers of culture. Writing in the New Zealand context, the work of Sue Jackson and Tina Vares discusses how pre-teen or “tween” consumers are influenced by sexualised portrayals of teenage girls and women. See for example their 2015 articles: “Perfect Skin, Pretty Skinny: Girls’ Embodied Identities and Post-Feminist Popular Culture” and “Preteen Girls, Magazines, and the Negotiation of Young Sexual Femininity.”

the central event in the narrative that starts her downward spiral). Surrounded by girls with considerably different and smaller body types, Ellie begins to experience feelings of alienation from her peers in relation to body difference. While walking around the mall after her experience, Ellie thinks to herself:

I wish *I* was made out of plasticine. Then I'd roll myself out, long and very very thin. I'd stretch my stubby fingers into elegant manicured hands. I'd narrow my neck and my ankles. I'd scrape huge chunks off my bottom. I'd pull off all my brown wiry hair and make myself a new long blond hairstyle. (14, emphasis in original)

Ellie's desire to remould herself as she would a mound of plasticine demonstrates her place within a culture of body dysmorphia and modification, a culture that idolises the thin and where it is quite normal to diet and exercise to excess, or quite literally remould one's physical self through plastic surgery. Secondly, the description of the self as plasticine is reductive in that it reduces Ellie to a smoothed out lump: lacking individuality and character, not flesh and not fully human. It is therefore symbolic of Ellie's confused sense of identity (akin to Tina's) as well as her growing need to change her body's physical state at the expense of her character. Ellie's developing sense of alienation is increased by other skinny female bodies that are closer to home. Both her best friends, Natalie and Magda, possess body types that are perceived as culturally more desirable: one is tall and thin, the other has curves in "all the right places". Even at home she is confronted by a younger stepmother who is much smaller than her. Ellie's attempt to reduce her size, to remould herself and fit in, are consistent with what Driscoll writes is "the continual process of reforming body image characteristic of girl culture . . . The feminine adolescent desires her-self as she might become - a potential visualized in connection to the other girls and constructed through observation of her own and other girls' bodies" (239). This statement reinforces cultural ideologies that present the female body as something to be observed, to be gazed upon, not only by others but by the self. It is something to be controlled

and regulated: a reinvented body image Panopticon. The following section approaches the narrative from a Foucauldian perspective. I argue that in order to ultimately critique the ideologies that have such an impact on young people, Wilson must first subject her protagonist to these systems of power that shape individuals.

### *The Panopticon and Body Experience*

The model of the Panopticon as a metaphor for our society is one that has been repeatedly taken up in discourse on the body and the female body in particular. The original Panopticon<sup>21</sup> was a design for a circular prison containing a central watch tower around which prison cells are arranged. This arrangement ensures that guards in the central tower are able to see all cells while, from the outside perspective and because of lighting, prisoners are unable to see inside the watch tower and are thus unsure of whether they are being watched. Presuming they are being observed at all times because of the omnipresent, all-seeing nature of the design, the prisoner assumes the role of self-disciplinarian and regulator of their own behaviour. The model of the Panopticon was taken up by French, post-structural philosopher Michel Foucault who, in his 1975 seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, used the model as a metaphor for societal surveillance and self-discipline. In the book he writes:

He [or she] who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection (202-203).

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<sup>21</sup> The design for the Panopticon was first proposed by Jeremy Bentham in a series of *Letters* written in 1787. The design, it is written in the introduction to *The Panopticon Writings*, “is nothing more than ‘a simple idea in architecture,’ never realized, describing ‘a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind,’ in a quantity hitherto without example’ - the possessor of this power is ‘the inspector’ with his invisible omnipresence, ‘an utterly dark spot’ in the all-transparent, light-flooded universe of the panopticon” (1).

Foucault's work emphasises the idea that our society is one of surveillance (217). Accordingly, society is responsible for the production of a normalising gaze<sup>22</sup>, one which exerts power over individuals and their bodies. Although this gaze is not physically present in our lives, not directly focused on individuals as are Orwell's ever watching telescreens<sup>23</sup>, its presence is nevertheless unavoidable.

The most prominent example we have today of an omnipresent, power wielding machine of society is the mass media. The plurality of this term underlines the fact that this large part of our culture is everywhere and its influence on life is inescapable for many individuals. It is, one could argue, an insidious Panopticon. The position of the media and its impact on society and individuals is further emphasised by Foucault:

under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth . . . the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies. (217)

The media (encompassing such cultural outlets as film, television, internet<sup>24</sup>, and magazines) are the foremost producers of images and disseminators of signs in our society.<sup>25</sup> Images

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<sup>22</sup> In Foucauldian theory, **normalisation** is carried out through disciplinary power which "refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed . . . The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes* (*Discipline and Punish* 182-183, emphasis in original). Such a technique singles out the "abnormal" individual. In the space my chosen subject, it may be observed in the categorising or labelling of individuals as "fat" or "thin".

Foucault theorises the **normalising gaze** as an examination: "The examination combines the techniques of observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement . . . It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them . . . it manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected (ibid 184-185). Foucault's gaze targeted specific institutions such as the military and hospitals. However, his reference to objectification marks it as useful for discussing how the body is perceived in the context of this thesis.

<sup>23</sup> In his 1949 novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

<sup>24</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century this includes such social media sites as Facebook, however, writing in the late 1990s, this is not a feature of Wilson's novel.

<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that, writing in the 1960s-1980s, Foucault could not have anticipated the rise of media and visual culture and its impact on society in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes of Bentham's dream of a "network of mechanisms that would be everywhere and always alert,

transmit a cultural pedagogy of what is good and normal with regards to the body (primarily here, its appearance, size, shape, but also importantly, its colour and gender). Such images and cultural constructions of the perfect body are often directed at young women and adolescent girls who are taught to equate self-worth with body image<sup>26</sup>, an image that is pushed to the extreme in the case of those with eating disorders. Acceptance and worth are thus based on conformity to societal ideals. These signs and signifiers Foucault describes can be found everywhere: in Hollywood films that only cast those with “desirable” body types, fashion models with jutting hip and collar bones, advertisements for products that promise to eliminate fat. As Brumberg writes, “Female socialization in the hands of the modern media emphasises external qualities (“good looks”) above all else...Young girls, fed on this ideological pabulum<sup>27</sup>, learn to be decorative, passive, powerless<sup>28</sup>, and ambivalent about being female. Herein lies the cause of anorexia nervosa, according to the cultural model” (33). Written everywhere are messages that separate the ‘good’ body from the ‘bad’ in accordance with societal expectations, teaching women and girls what they ought to be.

When considering how conscious females are of their bodies as a result of such expectations, it is no wonder that Foucauldian theory is repeatedly referenced in feminist discourse on the female body (despite the lack of reference to feminism and gender studies in Foucault’s work). Many authors have expanded on Foucault’s ideas on the Panopticon, society

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running through society without interruption in space or time” (209). One could argue that the media and the internet in particular, with their ability to span both space and time, fulfil such a desire.

<sup>26</sup>For the purpose of this analysis I refer primarily to female body image production. However, this is not to say that men are not also swayed by cultural standards and the need to possess a specific body. For example, Susan Bordo writes that “most men, equally with women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions and practises that they as individuals did not create and do not control and that they frequently feel tyrannized by” (28). This demonstrates that both genders may feel the pressure to conform and fit in.

<sup>27</sup> I think it important to note here (in the consideration of eating disorders) the different definitions attached to the word “pabulum”. First, according to the Oxford English Dictionary online, it refers to food or nourishment. Secondly it refers to “Bland intellectual fare, pap; a sample of this; an insipid or undemanding diet of words, entertainment, etc.” (Oxford English Dictionary online). The use of the term in this context suggests an undermining of ideologies that help to advance eating disorders.

<sup>28</sup> Although, I argue, a desire for “good looks” is not necessarily congruous with passivity and powerlessness. I believe that a woman/girl can seek and hold positions of power while also wanting to fit in with cultural standards of beauty.

and self-surveillance, power and control, in relation to how women and adolescent girls feel about their bodies and how they treat them. They emphasise that it is not surprising that in a culture which places so much importance on body image, so many women and girls suffer with body issues and at the extreme end of the scale, eating disorders. Marilyn Lawrence states the prevalence of this, writing that the “psychological need to control weight and to be thin are common enough preoccupations amongst women in general. Clearly, this is related to the pressures upon women to conform physically to a culturally defined stereotype which, at present, revolves around thinness” (94). Society enacts power in its ability to construct and disseminate desirable bodies through cultural signifiers which many (but not all) feel pressured to follow. As is the case with the Panopticon, there is no need for any literal, normalising discipline to create conformity, just the existence of a presumed gaze. Ellie, during the course of her eating disorder, exhibits this ideology. Apart from at the beginning of the novel when a stranger calls her fat, no one else appears to judge her harshly within the narrative. However, Ellie continues to believe that every time she is looked at, the other person is judging her weight. It is clear in the narrative that Ellie has internalised the Foucauldian gaze as she harshly judges herself in place of others. Evidently, the presumption of visibility, of potentially being judged for not conforming to certain standards, is enough to create a self-disciplining, self-punishing subject who feels she must be in control of her body at all times so that she may “fit in”, both literally and figuratively. Kim Chernin reiterates this position in relation to cultural standards: “This body that she has created, after an arduous struggle against nature, in conformity with her culture’s ideal standard for a woman, cannot be left to its own desires. It must be perpetually shaped, monitored, and watched” (*Womansize* 23).

Surveillance of this sort places females both at the centre and at the periphery of the Panopticon. Not only do women and girls enact a culturally produced gaze upon the self, they also project this gaze onto other females. Such individuals become not only the object but the

one who objectifies. In looking at and judging other women/girls as well as the self, the individual takes two positions. Frost states that the position of the female individual as voyeur:

has been variously theorized as the active internal male subject in our being watching the passive female object, or as us identifying with this position. It has also been taken as women identifying with the women they are watching, to measure themselves against and/or to learn how to be like them (Betterton np. qtd in Frost “Doing Looks” 129).

In a society that has been deemed patriarchal and where “the subject of the gaze is male and the object female” (Frost 132), such patriarchal power is at the centre of feminist thought. It can be argued that the act of women looking at women and judging them on appearances does render a woman complicit in a patriarchal system that values a woman’s looks. However, here I take the position that identification between females and comparative measurement is more imperative to the production of unhealthy body image and eating disorders, than identification with a male gaze<sup>29</sup> that has been theorised as primarily voyeuristic in the sexual essence of the term. Young women subjected to a bombardment of images in the media that display specific body types are taught to evaluate themselves against the ideals presented in these images. Such images however, may be impossible to live up to. Plastic surgery, airbrushing and photoshopping allow for the creation of seemingly perfect bodies, smooth bodies (such as the “ideal” plasticine body that Ellie envisions) with imperfections eliminated to suit the capitalist intentions that are at the heart of Western society in particular. The desire for a body like that

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<sup>29</sup> The subject of the “male gaze” is most often applied to feminist readings of visual culture (films television etc.). Laura Mulvey discusses this subject in her book, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989), writing that “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (19). While this gaze is important, I still assert the importance of a less passive female at male and female at female gaze in modern society.

which has been artificially created requires extreme measures, extreme dieting and exercise, if hopes of attaining such a near impossibility are to be realised.

In portraying Ellie's eating disorders and her desire to fit in and look good, Wilson's work is engaging with these discourses over expectations of the female body. Whether one regards Wilson's novel as an intentional critique of such a cultural ideologies or not, the narrative does suggest some dangers associated with the possession of a "desirable" look which may draw the male gaze as well as the female. Throughout the first half of the novel, Magda gains the most male attention because of the way she looks. However, in the sixth chapter this desirable look appears dangerous to her when the boy that she likes, Mick, attempts to have sex with her even though she is unwilling:

‘Well I just thought he was trying it on at first, and I told him to stop it, but he didn't, and his hands started going all over the place and then he got to my jeans and I started getting mad and told him to cut it out, what sort of girl did he think I was and he said . . . he said, “Everyone knows what sort of girl you are, Magda, so stop acting hard to get, right?”’ (115)

She follows this by telling Ellie, “he said I was asking for it. He said why did I dress like a tart if I wasn't willing to act like one” (116). Later on, Magda crops her long blonde hair and dyes it light brown, evidently in an attempt to draw less attention to herself. Suggesting that Magda is “asking for it” implicates this male character in a culture of rape victim blaming but not necessarily one agreed upon by Wilson (a distinction needs to be made between the two). I choose to argue that Wilson is instead drawing attention to this culture without intending to replicate it.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Wilson later takes Magda out of hiding, endowing her with a short bright red hair style and she tells Ellie, “why should I scuttle round like a colourless creep just because of those sad bastards” (178). Wilson's positioning of Magda alongside of Ellie suggests that

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<sup>30</sup> As suggested in my first chapter, authorial intention is second to how a reader chooses to interpret such touchy subjects. Someone may view it as critique, others replication.

females, in such a patriarchal society, are endangered by both the male and female gaze, regardless of whether or not they possess the “right” look. In giving Magda a new look which is not in keeping with traditional ideas of femininity, Magda is quickly released from the shackles of occupying the Foucauldian norm. Unfortunately, it takes Ellie much longer to escape the need to conform.

Existing as metaphorical prisoners of the Panopticon, those with eating disorders exhibit a desperate and destructive need to control the body as a means of creating that which fits with cultural expectations of an unassuming, unthreatening femininity. On the subject of anorexia nervosa and control of the body, Marilyn Lawrence’s writing suggests that anorexics have trouble turning outside and engaging with the world. “Instead they exercise self-control, which we might understand as power turned inwards. The battleground then becomes an internal one; the battle is fought within the individual rather than between the individual and the world” (93). Internalisation is mentioned again by Marshall who argues that “girls continue to ingest a cultural pedagogy that teaches girls to turn their anger inward rather than outward” (128). From such a perspective, self-destructive behaviours such as eating disorders and other forms of self-harming may be seen as stemming from the influence of a society that views females as docile creatures. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault deals with the subject of “docile bodies.” According to Foucault, “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136). Foucault writes that the body is a puppet: something to be controlled and coerced. However, the absence of the use of female pronouns and female specific examples to describe the oppressed docile body is one point of frustration for feminist theorists who deal with Foucault’s work. For example, Sandra Lee Bartky questions and argues:

Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the ‘docile bodies’ of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men? Women, like men, are subject to many of the disciplinary practises Foucault describes. But he is blind to those disciplines that produce a

modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine. To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those whom these disciplines have been imposed on” (65).

In defence of Foucault, his work is inclined to lend examples from areas of society such as the military, institutions that, to this day, remain male dominated. However, the crux of Bartky’s argument is that docility, as it is understood today, is traditionally the affliction of the female, or rather the appropriately feminine body. Part of the “powerlessness” of the docile body and the female docile body in particular, Bartky argues further, is in its expected smallness. Bartky states that this smallness does not simply lie in a compact figure but also in the literal position that females assume in contrast to males. Bartky writes that “there are significant gender differences in gesture, posture, movement, and general bodily comportment: Women are far more restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their lived spatiality” (67). However, ultimately, it is the expected smallness of the female body that renders it docile. “Female bodies become docile bodies...whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, “improvement” via the ‘extracting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress” (Budgeon 39). Disciplines of diet, in this context in particular, create bodies that fit with Foucault’s model of the docile body within a society that demands improvement and constraint.

Alternatively, anorexia, as a way of literally becoming less visible, has also been theorised as an attempt to evade the Panoptic gaze even as the body becomes more visible in some ways. Such a theory has been discussed by Malson<sup>31</sup> and Ussher who write that “The construction of anorexia as a fading away or not wanting to be seen can be read as an avoidance of the disciplinary gaze that Foucault describes as part of a micro-physics of power that both

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<sup>31</sup> Malson also discusses this in her 1998 book, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*.

controls and produces individuals” (49). The act of becoming smaller hence could be read as a metaphor for a desire to effectively become invisible and thus avoid the kind of judgement that produces the self-conscious individual who fears criticism. Malson and Ussher’s article is primarily concerned with anorexia in relation to death and self-destruction. They write that “‘getting smaller’ is not so much about being femininely petite or attractive as about self-destruction” (49). However, I do not think it possible to completely separate eating disorders from a desire to be attractive. The drive to be attractive could at least be considered to lie at the root of initial obsessions with dieting and exercise. Nevertheless, as eating disorders progress, negative views of the body increase. At this stage the obsession with becoming smaller may have a greater connection to the eradication of the self, the desire for the destruction of the individual both inside and out. Malson and Ussher further state that “Anorexia is constituted here as a response to ‘the fear...of being me’. Fading away thus signifies an evasion of the individualising gaze; it is an avoidance of ‘being me’” (52). Ellie shows great unease with herself and as her eating disorder progresses, her disgust with her body increases. The “evasion of the individualising gaze” is present in her fears of being singled out as the fat one. Finally, “fading away” as avoidance of “being me” supports how bound adolescent girls are to their bodies and how imperative the body is to the individual.

The subject of fading away or self-destruction aligns *Girls Under Pressure* with *Falling Apart*. Both Ellie and Tina have suffered the trauma of losing a loved one although in both cases these deaths do not appear to be the central cause of either Ellie’s eating disorder or Tina’s suicide attempt. Nevertheless, death appears pivotal to the protagonists’ behaviour: Tina’s self-harm starting after her brother’s death and Ellie’s issues with food, after her mother’s death. As suggested in the previous chapter, traumatic experience can have negative consequences for a person’s sense of self causing separation issues and guilt. Judith Herman suggests that “many traumatised people feel that a part of themselves has died. The most

profoundly afflicted wish that they were dead” (49). Later in this chapter I suggest that Ellie’s eating disorder has some basis in an attempt to separate from her mother. Without wishing to discount this theory, I want to posit here that self-destructive behaviours may constitute an attempt to return to or identify with the lost body, in this case the dead. Just as Tina stabbing herself causes a wound symbolic of her brother’s at the point of death, Ellie’s eating disorder results in a fading away that is also symbolic of her mother’s death. That is, both bodies become more alike in their reduction and would, if Ellie were to die of her illness, be reunited in their death.

Moving away from theorising self-destruction as a kind of death wish in the wake of traumatic experience, I lastly wish to suggest how this behaviour fits within theory on female masochism. Bartky discusses the subject of “feminine masochism” (45) however, her analysis is primarily on masochism as it is traditionally defined, that is, in terms of sexual pleasure and pain. Here I argue that such masochism goes beyond borders of sexual experience to other experiences of the primarily female body. As previously suggested Ellie’s relationship with her body is destructive and focused on elimination. In response to her rumbling stomach, Ellie punishes herself for her weakness: “‘Shut up,’ I say. I punch myself hard in my own stomach. ‘You’re not getting fed today, do you hear, you great big ugly gut?’” (28). Aside from outright physical violence directed at the body, starvation of the body, the denial of the body’s needs, constitutes self-punishment and self-destruction in an effort to attain a body that may be enjoyed by the individual and accepted by society. Such punishment may thus be paradoxically linked with pleasure in the possibility of attaining such a body. Later in the book, as physical symptoms of her disorder increase, Ellie says, “I’m feeling a bit faint- but I get a weird little thrill out of this. I’m in control now. I’m getting thinner” (144). Ellie views the outcomes of her starvation as a reward; pain turns into thrill, suffering into pleasure at the thought of a perfected body. As with its sexual desires and appetites, the body is also in possession of

appetites requiring food; such requirements connect food with sex. For those with eating disorders, food is both a pleasure and a pain. Those who suffer with anorexia are obsessed with food and yet deny themselves the pleasure and necessity. This is exemplified in the novel during the numerous times when Ellie drools over her friends' and family's food. Others who suffer from bulimia gorge on food before purging themselves in disgust and disgrace. Such behaviour marks the pleasurable and painful associations between the desired/desiring body, food, and the obsessed individual. Herein lies the masochistic nature of the eating disorder and its controlling effects on those who suffer from this illness.

### *The Control Paradox*

After obesity and asthma respectively, anorexia nervosa is the third most common chronic illness in young females in developed societies (“Central Region Eating Disorder Service” np). Because of this dissatisfaction with body image and size, the subject of how eating disorders are portrayed in fiction for young people is something that warrants scrutiny. The term anorexia comes from Latin and “literally means ‘loss of appetite.’ But such is not the case with those experiencing anorexia. They hunger for food while denying themselves the pleasure of eating” (Oldis 84). Anorexia denotes an obsession with food in that it occupies the sufferer's thoughts even as they are in the midst of self-starvation; denial of food is perceived as a demonstration of control and power over both body and mind. In *Hunger Strike*, Susie Orbach writes of the controlling effects of food on the anorexic: “Food denial is driven by a need to control her body which is, for her, a symbol of emotional needs. If she can get control over her body, then perhaps she can similarly control her emotional neediness” (xii). For Orbach, food is strongly connected to emotions and thus the act of not eating signifies control of, and potentially denial of emotional needs. Later in this chapter I explore further this connection between food and emotions, considering its purpose as an object of comfort and nurturance and a bandage for negative feelings.

However, the denial at the centre of eating disorders is that food is really something that controls rather than being something to be controlled. In *Girls under Pressure*, Ellie demonstrates her belief in the control of her body after starving herself when she suggests how she is getting thinner because she is “in control now.” In being overweight, Ellie feels as if her body, and subsequently other areas of her life, are out of control. This further relates to Orbach’s point that the “body is experienced as an object that must be controlled or it will control. The emaciated body demonstrates that she controls her body whereas the average [or overweight] sized body controls her” (129). During adolescence in particular, body image is often experienced as the site of the self as a whole and thus, the site of self-worth. As Dolgin writes, “during adolescence, a large part of our self-esteem is tied up with how physically attractive we feel” (98). So control of the body and its size through food is indicative of being in control of one’s life and the self as a whole. However, *Girls under Pressure* makes apparent the fact that food is the object that is in control of the person who suffers with an eating disorder. While Ellie frequently denies herself food entirely, her bouts of starvation often end with binging on fattening foods which is later followed with purging. Even when Ellie is able to prevent herself from indulging she cannot help but drool over her family and friends’ food and constantly thinks about the many foods that formed her previous diet.

Interestingly, studies on perceptions of eating disorders reveal discrepancies between views on anorexia and control and views on bulimia and control. For example, Maree Burns writes that

anorexia brings with it the appearance and feeling of total control and almost total denial...Bulimia on the other hand, brings with it a feeling of being completely out of control. It is shameful in its indulgent excesses, revolting in its final scenario . . . (269)

Bulimia is understood to represent a lack of control and anorexia quite the opposite: over control” (275). In relation to Burns’ study, this issue is also discussed by Walsh and Malson who write that “whilst those diagnosed as ‘anorexic’ were positively construed as able to control their appetite, the women in her study often construed their ‘bulimic selves negatively as ‘failed anorexics’” (531). For Ellie, who swings between self-starvation and bingeing/purging, such a view highlights her oscillating feelings of being both in and out of control at various stages in the story.

Wilson’s narrative further demonstrates knowledge of some of the defining physical and personality features of someone suffering with an eating disorder:

I really seem to have got the knack of dieting now. I’m still starving hungry all the time and my tummy aches badly and I keep having to pee a lot and whenever I get up quickly or rush round I feel faint and most of the time I have a headache and I feel a bit sick and I’ve got a filthy taste in my mouth and my hair’s gone all floppy and I’ve got spots all over my face and on my back too-but it’s worth it to lose weight. Isn’t it? I’m not anorexic. Not like Zoe (177).

Ellie’s description of what has happened to her body mirrors some of the common symptoms of an eating disorder that accompany drastic weight loss. Additionally, Ellie reveals that she has a one track mind and is willing to accept a breakdown in other areas of her appearance and health in her quest for weight loss. She also again expresses a delusion that she has no problem and is different from Zoe who, to Ellie and others, is clearly anorexic. Furthermore, *Girls under Pressure* outlines some personality traits and histories that may lead to the development of eating disorders. In his attempts to understand his daughter’s behaviour, Ellie’s father begins reading books on anorexia, telling her: “You really do have all the classics signs of an anorexic personality. You’re clever, you’re a perfectionist, you’re very determined, you can lie like crazy, you’ve had a traumatic childhood...you know, losing your mother so young” (175). Ellie’s description of her physical state as well as her father’s research into some characteristics

of anorexic personalities and potential causes of anorexia, draw attention to some defining, visible features of the disease. Wilson's inclusion of these facts could be taken as a guide to understanding someone who may be suffering with an eating disorder.

Along this line, the above depiction of Ellie's eating disorder offers opportunity for critique which, as I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, may be beneficial to the avoidance of reader replication. Furthermore, an important distinction exists between Ellie as a character and the author's opinion of eating disorders that positions the text as an intended critique. The author's presentation of the side effects of her illness and Ellie's resulting anxiety allows readers more chance to be critical of her mental state while still offering space for sympathy through the first person perspective. These features, I argue, are a critical device for Wilson in her representation of eating disorders. Through them, she makes it possible for the reader (who may also suffer from the same illness) to both identify and, more importantly, distinguish themselves from the protagonist. These are features that I believe are missing in *Falling Apart*. The passage above in which Ellie describes her side effects is one in which her frame of mind appears to show a glimpse of change. Ellie asks both herself and the reader if "it's worth it to lose weight. Isn't it?" (177). This self-reflection and addressing the reader who is thus also invited to reflect is acknowledgement that the first step to recovery from the grip of this illness is recognition.

### *Bodily Alienation and Abjection*

Backtracking from Ellie's recognition of her side effects, I next want to discuss the concept of alienation as a further symptom of eating disorders. The concept of bodily alienation can be connected not just with the anorexic or bulimic individual but also with adolescence/puberty and the resulting transformation of the body into something foreign and different from the child's body. As Grosz states:

It is in this period that the subject feels the greatest discord between the body image and the lived body, between its psychical idealized self-image and its bodily changes...The adolescent body is commonly experienced as awkward, alienating, an undesired biological imposition.

(75)

As suggested earlier, adolescence is the period in which eating disorders are most likely to occur, particularly in females. As a result, some connect this to the beginning of menstruation which signals physical maturity. Fear of such maturity and growing up may lead to teenage girls starving themselves which has the effect of halting menstruation and reducing the body to a more child-like state through loss of fat. Experience of the body as an alien as well as a source of alienation has been discussed, among others, by Kim Chernin and Alessandra Lemma. Chernin writes that the bodies of overweight people are “disowned, alienated, foreign, perhaps stubbornly present but not truly a part of the real self” (*Womansize*<sup>32</sup> 53) and that “existing from the neck up, we live out our lives feeling alien within it, disembodied” (55). I think it important to note here that I believe that everyone, and not just those with weight issues, experiences insecurity and is not always comfortable with their bodies. However, my point here is that for an adolescent with an eating disorder, the experience of the body as something foreign may be particularly strong. Lemma takes this point further with regards to the adolescent body in particular, writing that: “Puberty propels the body onto the centre of the psychic stage. It is not unusual for the adolescent who is confused and frightened by the hormonal and physiological changes in his or her body to experience their body as a threatening monster or alien, an altogether other object that is not part of the self” (xxiii). These points relate to the confusion and sense of loss of control that surround the body’s growth and change during adolescence. Such feelings of being taken over by the body may be what lead to an eating disorder. As I have shown, eating disorders are characterised by a desire to take back

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<sup>32</sup> Also published under the title: *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*

control of the body. The fat body is perceived as controlling the occupant whereas a thinner body is seen as demonstrating control over the body. In other words, to control food intake is to control one's life. Susie Orbach further discusses the link between weight gain and going out of control (129), writing that "the alienated body is simply something to be dealt with. The struggle to make it smaller and even smaller is a means of placing the body under her control. It can never be small enough to be safely controlled rather than controlling" (130).

However, it is the mind of the person who suffers with an eating disorder that may be viewed as controlling in its connection to the body. Even as the body shrinks the mind still perceives the body as fat where no amount of weight loss is ever enough. This is one of the contradictions with eating disorders: those suffering experience a kind of disconnection or split between their mind and body<sup>33</sup> but at the same time are unable to view the body objectively. The pleas of family and friends who can view the body more objectively, do nothing for the denial which is at the centre of this illness. So it is that as Ellie stands naked in front of the mirror after being called fat at a modelling contest, she recognises an invaded and invasive body: "It's like I'm looking at my own body for the first time...I stand there, feeling like I've stepped into a science-fiction movie. An alien has invaded my body and blown it up out of all recognition" (26-27). It is here that Ellie recognises her growing body: "I can't believe I'm so fat. I've always known I'm a bit chubby. Plump. Biggish. But not *fat*. (27). This moment of perception is the primary example of Ellie moving towards feelings of alienation from her body, and the idea that her body is different from her self. Ellie believes that she is seeing herself truly for the first time, "I put my glasses on" (26), but while the fat girl staring at her from the mirror may be close to her real image now, the subsequent, mentally constructed

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<sup>33</sup> Despite being a dominant notion, it may be argued that the idea of a clear split between mind and body is rather simplistic and it is better to say that each (mind and body) influences the other. Nevertheless, I suggest this notion here as implicated in the framing of eating disorders (and how those suffering may come to understand their illness) according to a cultural model.

image never changes even as she loses extreme amounts of weight. In light of this, I argue that the changes associated with puberty and resulting fears surrounding maturity mark *Girls Under Pressure* as an *Entwicklungsroman* novel. Here, the adolescent body is at the stage of “becoming” but with no solid end point as would be the requirement of a *Bildungsroman*. I suggest further that texts that deal with eating disorders are particularly rejecting of the principles of the *Bildungsroman*. Eating disorders halt certain aspects of female development such as menstruation which is one signifier of physical/psychological/emotional maturation. The “becoming” process of the *Entwicklungsromane* is more closely tied to feelings of alienation from the changing body as well as the subject of abjection, of becoming a being that is separate from another.

Kristevan theory on abjection is particularly useful for discussing the subject of the alienated anorexic body as one of spectacle and horror and for the discussion of the body’s relationship to food. Writing within the field of psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection refers to the Oedipal complexities surrounding separation from the mother, or else conceiving of the mother as “Other.” In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva writes that: “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be . . .” (10). Kristevan theory can be applied to the subject of the mother-daughter relationship as will be discussed shortly and in my third chapter. At this point, however, I wish to examine abjection as it relates to one’s relationship with food as an object which, like the mother, is both desired and expelled.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes that:

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk- harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette

paper, pitiful as a nail paring- I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach...But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I *abject* myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*. (2-3)

Abjection as expulsion connects Kristeva’s writing with the experience of anorexia and in this case, bulimia in particular. Bulimia is characterised by the purging of liquids and foods which may be considered symbolic of the (a)voiding of emotions. Furthermore, Kristeva’s idea of the expulsion of the self echoes the earlier mentioned fragmented and alien sense of self experienced by those with anorexia. To expel the self through the expulsion of food and shedding of fat equates to the expulsion of the monstrous from the body. Food, Megan Warin writes in relation to Kristeva’s work and anorexia, “is characterised as disgusting, polluting, contaminating, evil, poisonous, dirty, defiling, and harmful” (105). Similarly, the body is perceived as “out of place, dirty and polluted, dangerous, disgusting, diseased, contaminated, soiled, and impregnated with evil” (137). Warin’s work deals with the subject of the “disgusting body,” as experienced by the anorexic, something that must be cleansed and purged of evil, polluting food and fat. “Restricting and purging cleansed their bodies of that which disgusted them: dirty and polluting food” (129). Purging “was a transformative process that temporarily eviscerated emotional states (of disgust, shame, and guilt) and senses of embodiment (of emptiness and purity)” (132). Ellie’s own experience with food is complicated: she simultaneously loves and hates it. Such a relationship positions food, albeit complicatedly, as abject for, as stated by Warin, the “word ‘abject’ literally means to cast off, exclude, or prohibit, yet abjection is defined by its relationship to desire” (112). It is “like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (Kristeva 1).

During her Christmas break in Wales, Ellie's father brings the family fish and chips and Ellie is unable to resist the desire to gorge but is immediately horrified by what she has done:

As soon as I've finished I feel terrible. Utterly disgusted at my own greed and weakness. The waistband of my jeans cuts into my full-to-bursting stomach. I wish I could slice it right open so I could scrape all the food out. Well... I *could* get rid of it. As long as I don't hang about too long (135-136).

Ellie's words exhibit the desperate need to cleanse and rid the self of disgusting, polluting food; food which is at the heart (or stomach) of the perceived disgusting, monstrous body and must be eliminated. Ellie's subsequent purging and desire to scrape out her insides, to abject herself, represents rejection of the object which is both desired and in need of expulsion. In order to detach herself from food, Ellie recreates it as something dirty and undesirable:

I take my new chinks and my new sketch book and draw a table groaning with Christmas fare. But it's all been spoilt- there's furry mould growing on the sandwiches, the fruit is rotting in the bowl, little mice are nibbling the cheese, and flies crawl all over the white icing on the cake (158).

This depiction of food turns the desired object into something horrific, something both abject and in need of abjection. Ironically, as food becomes an object of horror in the eyes of the anorexic, the body of the anorexic herself, becomes an object of horror and spectacle in the eyes of those in possession of "normal" bodies.

On the subject of abjection, Kristeva writes further that "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject" (4). While the anorexic body is not dead (although without any sort of intervention it may become so), it has been theorised as "that which is haunted by her own future ghost" and termed the "dead while alive" (Ferreday 148). In an emaciated state the anorexic body may be likened to that of

a corpse. In taking such a position, the anorexic body becomes one of horror and spectacle in the eyes of those who possess “normal” bodies; it is abject in that it is simultaneously compelling and repulsive. In *Girls under Pressure*, the anorexic character Zoe takes the position of the corpse like figure, whose body is both horrifying and attractive to Ellie. In an attempt to view Zoe’s emaciated body further, Ellie follows her into the swimming pool changing rooms and describes her fragile looking bones and visible tendons:

Her face is so shrunken in on itself you can see the shape of her skull. She is seriously starving to death.

But when she shivers through the shower, raising her fragile arms, her tummy is totally flat in her skintight lycra costume, I still feel a stab of envy. I *must* lose weight. I want to be thin (84, emphasis in original).

Zoe’s body is thus positioned as both a spectacle of horror and a spectacle of desire. Additionally, it provides a dark but inspiring mirror for what Ellie’s body may become without intervention. As a result she fits with Ferreday’s view of the anorexic body as holding “a double affective power: first, in their ability to engender disgust in the non-anorexic spectator and, second (and more threateningly), in their ability to *move* vulnerable, female spectators to imitation” (143, emphasis in original). Despite being more focused on images of anorexia in the media, Ferreday’s study of the abject anorexic body in society is nevertheless applicable to assessing Wilson’s portrayal of anorexia and the influence of girls on each other. Through the book, Wilson presents themes of the threateningly alien, alienated, and monstrous with regards to the teenage female body and the anorexic body in particular. In her portrayal of Ellie’s view of her body in relation to Zoe’s, Wilson also acknowledges the significant influence of females on each other as well as the significant influence of her texts in moving her readers to reflect on these issues as well.

### *Eating and the Mother-Daughter Relationship*

Ellie's new view of her body is followed by the revelation of the beginnings of her eating habits. Ellie reveals how eating functioned for her after her mother's death: "Everything changed. I changed too. I felt empty all the time so I couldn't stop eating: doughnuts and sticky buns and chocolate and toffees. The sorer I felt inside the more I had to stuff myself with sweets" (27). Ellie's words express how food functions for certain individuals. According to Hilary J. Beattie, "Binge eating serves a multitude of functions including the sadistic, destructive control of the needed object, but it also soothes, tranquillizes, and alleviates inner rage and tension, depression and loss" (456). Beattie further states that "Food is the most concrete possible symbol of the maternal object" (456). This is a symbol which will be repeated in my analysis in the third chapter. In the case of Ellie, food provides comfort after her mother's death and becomes the means of filling a void, both literally and figuratively. Food as a symbol of the maternal object refers to its nurturing qualities, nurturance which Ellie has lost (and nurturance which has also, in a sense, been lost in *The Illustrated Mum*, as will be examined further in the next chapter). Beattie writes: "Troubles arise most typically in the daughter's teens and is triggered by some experience of physical or psychological separation from the mother . . ." (457). As Ellie's forced separation, both physically and psychologically, occurs prior to her teenage years; her relationship with food takes a different course once she reaches adolescence. Ellie's experience with anorexia and bulimia occurs when she is still rather young, being only thirteen-years-old when the story takes place and it may, on an unconscious level, represent a retrospective attempt to separate psychologically from her mother while also mourning her loss. While talk of Ellie's mother is infrequent in the book, Ellie does mention to the reader that she keeps a photograph of her mother beside her bed which she occasionally talks to. Ellie thus reveals the fact that her relationship with her mother is on some level still in existence. Ellie's denial of food could represent two things: first, a desire to recover or move

on from her mother's death, and secondly, a normal teenage girl's need to individuate from the mother as a part of growing up.

The mother-daughter relationship is a subject that has been variously theorised in feminist psychoanalysis. Within this discourse, writers such as Luce Irigaray have discussed the complexities of such a relationship with regards to separation/individuation and nourishment. In her short essay "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other", Irigaray writes from a first person perspective of a daughter's seemingly stifling relationship with her mother. The focus is on a desire to separate from the pre-Oedipal self/mother; a relationship which Irigaray suggests revolves around, and exists within food:

Once more you're assimilated into nourishment. We've again disappeared into this act of eating each other. Again you want to fill my mouth, my belly, to make yourself into a plenitude for mouth and belly. To let nothing pass between us but blood, milk, honey, and meat (but no, no meat; I don't want you dead inside me) (62).

For this mother, her relationship with her daughter and food appears to function out of fear of loss of self: "And if I leave, you no longer find yourself. Was I not the bail to keep you from disappearing? The stand in for your absence? The guardian of your nonexistence?" (64). Nourishment of the daughter here, is symbolic of the mother's need to nourish herself, to keep herself alive. In *Girls under Pressure*, Ellie appears to take both the role of the above mentioned daughter and mother in her relationship with food. In the physical absence of her own mother, food takes the position of maternal object, in effect keeping her mother alive in its adoptive comforting qualities. However, as the story progresses, Ellie's rejection of food serves as a potential symbol of forced separation from her mother. It is, as suggested by Irigaray in the above, the removal of the "dead inside me."

At a later stage in the narrative we do get a sense of a desire to separate from the mother through the body and perhaps even guilty embarrassment with regards to the maternal body. Ellie writes, “I try drawing Mum from memory but it doesn’t work out too well. The line falters as I try to sketch her chest, her waist, her hips...now I think of her soft curvy body and I wonder. Was my mum a little bit fat? ...What does it matter if she was fat or thin? This is my dead mother, for heaven’s sake” (161-162). At this point in the story Ellie is in the midst of her obsession with weight and appears to find it difficult to conceive of her mother as overweight and draw her this way. Ellie demonstrates a conflict in her thinking, pulled between feelings of love for her mother and feelings of shame that her mother is in possession of a body type that Ellie now finds unattractive. At the same time as this, Ellie appears to express guilt for having such negative feelings about her deceased mother. Ellie’s drawing presents the complicity of the mother (indirectly in situations such as this) in an adolescent girl’s relationship with food and her body. Here, the mother’s body is presented as something soft, comforting and nurturing, something to be replaced by food later in life. But food is also seen as one of the reasons behind the growth of the maternal figure, a figure which the adolescent girl wishes to escape in her attempts to individuate from the mother and grow in a different trajectory. Although, I admit, this reading contrasts with my earlier suggestion that Ellie’s eating disorder may constitute a desire to return to the maternal body, I believe that both theories work within this discussion.

### *Resolution and Recovery*

In my first chapter I discussed the complexities involved in writing narratives that deal with potentially traumatic subject matter. Without wishing to discount that complexities still exist in presenting a safe and considerate rendering of eating disorders, this chapter suggests that Wilson moves beyond a passive consideration of trauma and self-destructive behaviours within this narrative. In my analysis of *Falling Apart*, I argued that there is no clear model of recovery

present in the text. Instead the protagonist appears exceptionally dependent on others and easily pushed around by her feelings regarding the past. In the end, the reader is left with the question of whether Tina has really recovered or regained any real sense of self after her suicide attempt.

In this chapter I have argued that the portrayal of Zoe and the impact that her body has on Ellie reflects what I see as Wilson's acknowledgement of what Ferreday calls the "double affective power" of anorexic bodies to move vulnerable (primarily female) subjects to imitation (143). While acknowledging this, I also suggested that Wilson provides space for readers to critique Ellie's condition during the periods in which she expresses anxiety over side effects. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I argue that *Girls Under Pressure*, without implying that overcoming this disorder is easy, ultimately provides a greater model of recovery and empowerment in the portrayal of her protagonist than exists in *Falling Apart*. Ellie displays this in the final pages of the novel, while at the pool, she finally says to herself, "'I'm not fat,' I whisper. 'I think I am, but I'm not, and even if I *am*, it doesn't matter, it's not worth dying for'" (200). At her next art lesson, Ellie creates a new painting:

I use dark pastels and big bold strokes for this seventh attempt [previously she has struggled to represent herself in this medium]. I make my hair frizz with life. I stick my chest right out. I stand with my fists clenched and my legs spread out." (201).

This new powerful painting, which is literally depicted in an illustration on the final page of the novel, is a symbol of Ellie's movement towards recovery. It is also worth noting that such a device is also employed in Anderson's novel *Speak*. In this novel, the protagonist Melinda uses sculpture as a means of expressing her pain and her art class appears to provide a small space of refuge from the emotional and social problems that afflict her subsequent to being raped. In this sense, art is portrayed as a form of therapy that helps the protagonists externally represent and come to terms with their circumstances in a way that Tina does not. As I have

mentioned before, I find the way in which Ellie appears to quickly bounce back from her disorder slightly unrealistic although not impossible. Nevertheless, I feel that Wilson's narrative provides a useful space for critique and understanding certain aspects of eating disorders.

Arguing for the ultimate power of the individual to resist ideology would not have been possible without a consideration of how the protagonist is first caught up in these systems of power. Here I want to return to the introduction to this thesis in which I mentioned Foucault's theory on "domination-repression". Roberta Trites, as also mentioned and with regards to Foucault, discusses the way in which the "adolescent's power is simultaneously acknowledged and denied, engaged and disengaged" (6). In considering *Girls Under Pressure*, from a Foucauldian perspective, I again suggest that Wilson's narrative acknowledges the influence of society on the individual and dominant ideologies that impact on young people in particular. However, I hope I have also suggested that, in having her protagonist eventually break free from her eating disorder, Wilson is further acknowledging the individual's power to overcome the forces of society and ideology thus proving the strength and capabilities of young people. While I will admit that Foucault's theory on domination-repression is not one that focuses on age related power systems which are a particular focus of this thesis, my aim in approaching Wilson's work from a Foucauldian perspective has been to suggest the way in which her writing may be seen to subvert such repressive ideologies.

Without forgetting that literary representations of such subjects will always be fraught with issues of ethicality and accuracy, the purpose of this chapter has been to unpack and discuss how Wilson's work explores the subjects of troubled girlhoods, body image, and relationships. Using theory stemming from psychology as well as sociocultural and post-structuralism, the first two sections of this chapter connect, more generally, body image with greater society expectations of what the female body should be, as well as the psychological

and physical changes and implications associated with puberty and growing into an adult body. Continuing from this, I discussed the developing and evolving female body in relation to feelings of alienation and the need to control the body. In doing so, I also incorporated psychoanalytic theory from Julia Kristeva on abjection. Finally, and connected to the subject of abjection, my last section dealt with the complexities associated with the mother-daughter relationship in psychoanalysis and its relevance to Ellie's relationship and rejection of food. My next and final chapter attempts further to elucidate the complexities and outcomes of the mother-daughter relationship and deconstruct representations of mental health issues, not only as experienced by children (as has so far been the case) but also by parents.

## 3.

### **Domestic madness: Home, family, and mental illness in *The Illustrated Mum***

‘Who would dare think the outcast and abandoned can find a home? Who could dream that one can love without being crushed under the weight of it? A miracle cure to heal the sick? Pah. What makes any of us think this could be true? And yet all of us, we participate in this myth, we create it, perpetuate it.’ (Vanderpool 304)

This final chapter presents an analysis of Wilson’s 1999 novel, *The Illustrated Mum*. Like the previous focus texts, the novel is a first person narrative, told from the perspective of a young protagonist. It is also a novel that deals with mental illness and its traumatic impact on young people and families. However, unlike the previous texts, *The Illustrated Mum* focuses on how a mother’s mental illness (bi-polar disorder) affects her daughters. Dolphin and Star’s lives revolve around dealing with the unpredictable behaviour of their mother: the extreme highs and deep depressive episodes that Marigold experiences as a result of her mental illness (she refuses to accept any sort of medical treatment). The family live on the knife edge of poverty, existing on a small government benefit which Marigold spends mostly on alcohol while leaving the house empty of food and her daughters in worn, second hand clothing. Neither of the girls know anything about their fathers except for Marigold’s lasting infatuation with Star’s long lost father, Micky. When Marigold finds Micky at a concert, she is determined to create the traditional ideal of a “whole” family (something that was missing in her own childhood). In her desperation, Marigold enters into a manic phase which Dolphin is forced to endure alone when Star leaves to live with Micky. When she realises that Star and Micky have gone for good, Marigold’s condition takes a turn to the extreme opposite and she sinks into a deep depression. At its climax, Marigold paints her body entirely white and Dolphin is finally forced

to have her hospitalised. Alone, Dolphin goes in search of her own father with the help of another outsider child Oliver (Owly)<sup>34</sup>. She is successful but is nevertheless placed in foster care. Dolphin and Star are soon reunited and visit their mother in the psychiatric hospital. At this stage Marigold's condition is still ambiguous in that she seems genuinely sorry for what she has put her daughters through, understanding that therapy has helped her to recognise her behaviour. On the other hand, however, she is convinced that the hospital staff are poisoning her. As with the previous novels I have focused on, the ending is ambiguous, the promise of a happy future, questionable; nevertheless, the original family unit is back together. The story ends: "It didn't matter if she was mad or bad. She belonged to us and we belonged to her. The three of us. Marigold and Star and Dolphin" (292).

This chapter aims to unpack and examine how Wilson's novel deals with the subject of mental illness, its symptoms and effects on the lives of the story's characters. My discussion is split into two parts. In the first, I deal with the influence of parental mental illness on family and home life, drawing on the fairy tale motif which is present in this narrative. The second section consists of a more in depth character analysis. Here, I analyse Marigold's mental illness as well as her expression of individuality (her tattoos) including an analysis of the roles of Star and Dolphin, whose development is both hindered and advanced by Marigold's condition. One of the dominant themes which will present itself throughout this chapter is that of the "mad", "bad", and "othered" mother/woman. This idea holds a difficult yet interesting place within discourse on children's literature and the complicated representation of motherhood has been a repeating issue across all areas of this thesis. A second concern of this chapter is the idea of the postmodern child/family as it has been theorised in literature studies and psychology. As in

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<sup>34</sup> There are parallels between the two characters Dolphin and Oliver. Both are outsider children at school with parents who are either absent or perhaps do not follow conventions of "good" parenting. Like Dolphin's mother, Oliver's mother also seems to have had a breakdown and is not coping after his father has left). His father, although somewhat present in Oliver's life, is not presented to us in the narrative itself. However, despite his own complicated home life, it is Oliver who encourages and assists Dolphin in the search for her father.

the previous chapter, I will be employing a mixture of feminist and mainstream psychological analysis, psychoanalysis, and sociocultural analysis in my discussion of this novel.

*Home, Family, and the Fairy Tale Motif*

Home and family commonly hold an awkward position within Wilson's novels. It can be a home away from (the biological family) home, as when Wilson's characters are fostered or brought up in children's homes. Families can be broken, or blended (including stepparents, stepchildren, and half siblings). Family members may be absent, either physically (such as in *Girls Under Pressure*) or emotionally (such as in *Falling Apart*), from the young protagonist's life. Often parents, even if physically present, are not as supportive of their children as may be hoped. In *The Illustrated Mum*, there is no lack of love between mother and child but Marigold's illness prevents her from recognising her own self-centred behaviour and neglect of her children's emotional and physical needs. Here, I examine the family unit as a whole, in particular the mother-daughter relationship, their home situation and the importance of the link between the narrative and fairy tales.

Home life is difficult for Star and Dolphin. Existing in near poverty, the family moves house frequently, presumably to avoid the violent boyfriends and other people to whom Marigold owes money. Dolphin describes how their current house is the best they have ever had; however, it lacks food, reliable hot water and common comforts: "The rental firm had taken our television and video recorder away last week because Marigold hadn't kept up the payments" (21). Circumstances do nevertheless appear better than they once were. Later in the novel, Dolphin is teased by her peers who say that she lives in a squat. She is quick to deny the claim but goes on to inform the reader that they had lived in several squats in the past: "One of them didn't have a sink. Someone had smashed it up, and the toilet too, so we had to use an Elsan [chemical toilet]. That was where Marigold had the worst boyfriend of all..." (80). Their

present flat could be read as both a sanctuary and somewhat of a nightmare. Dolphin adores the bedroom she shares with Star in which Marigold had painted the walls to resemble the ocean with dolphins and mermaids and the ceiling to reflect the night sky (106-107). In this sense the room does appear to symbolise a certain amount of freedom and also expresses Marigold's ability to be creative and to give her daughters a small safe place which allows their imaginations to grow. On the other hand, their home does create its own anxieties. The bottom story of the house is occupied by an ill-tempered elderly woman, Mrs Luft, who constantly threatens to call welfare on the family because of Marigold's behaviour. While she never acts on this, Star and Dolphin in particular frequently attempt to convince Mrs Luft that their home life and Marigold are fine. When Marigold and Star leave Dolphin home alone, Dolphin becomes exceedingly anxious, convinced that someone is attempting to break in (it is really Star returning):

I heard footsteps coming up the stairs. My heart started thudding. I gripped the pencil so tightly it made a groove in my hand. I waited for the knock at the door. I decided I wouldn't answer. Marigold owed lots of money to people. Some of the collectors were frightening. Or there were old boyfriends. Especially the scary ones (99).

Dolphin's fears represent Marigold's inability to provide her daughters with a home that they feel comfortable and safe in and therefore reinforces what Melanie Wilson and Kathy Short term "the mythology of home" (129).

According to Wilson and Short, "children's literature is rife with the idea of home" and it is the child's journey "to construct a home within a postmodern milieu of competing truths and failed adults. Ultimately the child's postmodern journey ends with the very modern ideal of the child leading adults to a hopeful ending, a home" (130). This desire for home is a reoccurring feature of Wilson's work despite the repetitive failure of adults to provide such a thing. As Ann Alston reiterates:

Problem families are confronted, rather than hidden away, but the traditional ideal of the family is very much apparent in Wilson's work; the heroes and heroines constantly yearn for a loving, two-parent family, for the house with four windows, a chimney and a central door (64).

While the physical features of the traditional, desirable home are missing from *The Illustrated Mum*, the child's desire for such an ending remains very much evident. At one point in the story, when Dolphin is in the school library, she remarks on how she most enjoys a book about a mum and dad:

I tried to imagine what it would be like living in a picture book world where monsters are quelled by a look and you feel safe back in your own bed and you have a spotty mum and stripy dad with big smiles on their pink faces and they make you laugh. (85)

Dolphin realises how unlikely it is that they will ever be a nuclear family, nevertheless, her life revolves around keeping her fragile home and family together. When Star breaks away from her mother and sister to be with her father, the consequences for both Dolphin and Marigold are disastrous. Following her mother's breakdown, Dolphin is forced to seek home in other places. She is quick to find her own father but becomes upset when she learns that he has a wife and two other daughters already and is not able to assimilate her into this family immediately: "I didn't make any attempt to kiss him back. After all, he was abandoning me. He didn't want me even though he was my dad" (259). Dolphin is thus subjected to feelings of abandonment (despite her father's acceptance of her and efforts to foster their relationship) and displacement and is forced yet again to feel two of the fears prevalent in such fiction on childhood.

Fulfilling her initial nightmare instilled by her mother's own bad experience, Dolphin is placed into foster care. It is the last place that Dolphin expects to find comfort and yet ironically it provides the homeliest and most nurturing space that Dolphin has ever occupied.

Aunty Jane is the foster mother who now provides the maternal comfort and security of which Dolphin was deprived. She is described as a fat woman who is quite ugly, however, “she had bright blue eyes though and a big smile. She smiled even more when she saw me” (261). Despite the somewhat negative review of her appearance, her largeness in particular seems to contribute to her overall maternal quality. While Marigold is both physically and mentally delicate and unable to provide properly for her children, Aunty Jane is wholesome and bountiful and Dolphin is never left to starve while under her care. It is in this sense that Wilson compares the more maternal, almost fairy godmother-like mother with what at times appears to be the unstable “bad” although “real” one.

Having finally found a space of greater stability and security, Dolphin is desirous to retain her newfound home to a point where she almost expresses possessiveness over it and her guardian. When she and Star are finally reunited at the house, Dolphin is initially extremely glad to see her but the morning after they begin to fight. When Aunty Jane breaks them up she attempts to hug both of them but Star pulls away from the embrace. Dolphin follows this by saying “I was glad when Star flinched away, tossing her plaits. She was *my* Aunty Jane and I didn’t want to share her” (286-287, emphasis my own). She also tells Star, “I’ve got my own life, a whole new life. What makes you think you have any right to barge in here? This is *my* foster home, not yours” (284, emphasis in original). The repetition of the word “my” is indicative of Dolphin’s possessiveness. She desires to have a space, a home of her own, and someone to love her and her only. She does not want to have to share yet another mother with her sister. In her interaction with Star, it is clear that Dolphin also recognises a child’s desire to be in possession of a parent’s love. When they argue, Dolphin taunts Star with the idea that Micky has dumped her in foster care and does not want her anymore:

‘He’s got fed up with you just the way he got fed up with Marigold.’

‘No, stop it. Shut up you hateful little cow. He does want me. He’s coming back for me. Don’t you dare say he won’t.’ (286)

Star’s reply is blemished by a certain amount of uncertainty over her father’s return. Her words reflect a clear belief in the idea that adults can never be fully relied on. The above reinforces a very real childhood fear of being abandoned or not cared for by the adults they love.

The unreliable and sometimes dangerous nature of home and parents is a reoccurring trope in traditional fairy tales and such fairy tales are often referred to in writing on this theme. A seminal scholar on this subject, Bruno Bettelheim was the first to write on the subject of fairy tales and the difficulties of childhood. Bettelheim argues that “They speak about his [or her] severe inner pressures in a way that the child unconsciously understands, and – without belittling the most serious inner struggles which growing up entails...”(6) and further that fairy tales convey the message “that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence – but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious” (8). Donald Haase, only briefly mentioning Bettelheim, writes that the use of fairy tale intertext is popular in children’s literature. Haase, although writing more specifically on children’s connection to fairy tales in World War Two, makes larger claims. For example, he suggests that children may use the “space of fairy tales to interpret their traumatic physical environments and their emotional lives within them” (361). The fairy tale’s appeal is additionally promoted by “its recurring pattern involving ‘the reconstruction of home on a new plane’ (176) This is driven by “our longing for home, which is discomfoting *and* comfoting” (Zipes, *Subversion*, 177, emphasis in original).

In *The Illustrated Mum*, Wilson alludes to fairy tales, and the story of “Hansel and Gretel” in particular in telling the story of the characters and a home which, as Zipes suggests,

holds both discomfoting and comforting properties. The use of fairy tale intertext represents again the desire for a happily ever after, a return home, but not before the child has endured trials: separation from parents and home, abandonment, and neglect. Wilson's allusion to fairy tales exists in two forms. First: in the novel's representation of the story of "Hansel and Gretel" and its connection to the Westward family's circumstances. Second: as a condensed portrayal of Dolphin's desire for her own happy ending and family.

On the subject of children and fairy tales (specifically "Hansel and Gretel" here) Haase writes that in:

this classic story of children in exile, home itself becomes an ambiguous location, embodying both the danger of violence and ultimate security. When violence upsets their familiar environment, the children are physically dislocated and forced into exile, into a defamiliarized perception of home. In typical fashion, their displacement is followed by relocation to a secure or familiar environment – that is, home reconstituted on a new plane. (364)

While Haase's article is focused on fairy tale spaces in relation to the child's reaction to the traumatic experience of war, his description of the experience of childhood dislocation mirrors the lives and displacement of Star and Dolphin. While Marigold and Dolphin are walking along a river bank one day, Dolphin mentions the story of Hansel and Gretel and how the really scary part is not the witch but the mother and father who abandon their children. She then goes on to recapture the ending of the tale: "it was supposed to be a *happy* end, Hansel and Gretel got away from the wicked witch and got all the way back home to their mum and dad and it was like, wow, we're together again, one big happy family" (69). Dolphin's cynical attitude towards such an ending is clear and it is evident that, despite her own situation, she has very set ideas about what makes for good parents and happy endings. Marigold interprets Dolphin's description of Hansel and Gretel as a reference to her own parenting or lack of and tries to explain herself:

‘I’d never leave you and Star, Dol,’ said Marigold.

‘I know.’

‘I did stay out – and I have done stuff that’s scary – but I would never try to lose you’

‘I *know*. It’s just a stupid fairy story.’ (69)

While Dolphin remains loyal to her mother throughout the narrative, her words cannot help but express a certain amount of anxiety over the idea of being separated from Marigold. This is also the point at which Marigold first speaks of her own separation from her mother when she herself was placed into foster care as a child: “‘It must have been horrible not having your mother’, I said, snuggling up to her. ‘I *had* a mother. She just didn’t want me. I didn’t care though’” (71). Here we are presented with Marigold’s background and her own abandonment by her mother, a subject that is raised again at the end of the book when Marigold undergoes therapy.

Subsequently, Dolphin and Marigold begin to construct their own miniature cottage, making use of some of the failed cakes that Marigold has baked. In one sense the cake cottage is wistful and representative of an idealised home. However, the characters’ intentions are to construct a replica of the witch’s house therefore removing a large amount of the cottage’s idyllic “sweetness.” In the following chapter Dolphin dreams of the cake cottage:

We sat at our fairy cake table and nibbled the thick icing with our sharp teeth but it tasted sickly sweet. We washed our paws and whiskers at the cupcake kitchen sink but golden syrup poured out of the taps and we were coated in sweet yellow slime. We curled up in our jam roll beds but the fruit cake walls all around us started crumbling and the marzipan ceiling suddenly caved in. a huge red vixen was up above us, eyes glinting. She opened her jaws wide and I screamed and screamed. (78)

Dolphin's nightmare represents the deceptive nature of an apparently idyllic home life. Both she and Star yearn for such a life but it is complicated or sticky (difficult). If Marigold is also represented by the red vixen, then this passage connotes the crumbling of the family's current home life as a result of her behaviour and actions. Here, Marigold is symbolised by something dangerous. She is at the centre of the destruction of home and family. Carolyn Daniel also references this passage in her discussion of the smothering mother, writing that:

It is perhaps also significant that Wilson has Marigold and Dolphin build a house, which, in Dolphin's dream, proves not to be a place of safety as is generally the case, but collapses upon the sisters leaving them vulnerable to the fox's wide jaws. (102)

Just as the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood" may be seen to represent a dangerous man, Wilson's narrative evokes the fairy tale in the repetition of the animal as symbol. In this case the fox is representative of the devouring and dangerous mother.<sup>35</sup>

Despite her own past and because of her mental illness which blinds Marigold to the needs of her children, she is unable to protect Star and Dolphin from a similar fate of parental neglect, abandonment, and dislocation. It is in this sense that the tale of "Hansel and Gretel" is set to repeat itself.<sup>36</sup> As described earlier in this chapter and by Haase in his analysis of "Hansel

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<sup>35</sup> The fox is a strongly symbolic animal within literature and society. The term for a female fox, "vixen", holds negative connotations, often related to woman, such as aggressiveness or promiscuity. The implications of such terminology are to be discussed later on in this chapter in connection with how Marigold holds up against standards of "good" mothering.

Fox symbolism is also discussed in Beryl Rowland's *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism*. Among a variety of connotations, Rowland notes that throughout time the fox has symbolised the Devil, a trickster, craftiness, and an untamed nature (pp. 76-80). While terms such as trickster and the Devil in particular may be a little far-fetched in relation to Marigold, there is an amount of craftiness and deceitfulness in some of Marigold's actions (fraudulent credit cards to name one) and she certainly runs outside of the norms of society.

<sup>36</sup> Aunty Jane also makes a connection between Star and Dolphin and the children from the story "The Babes in the Wood" on page 286. Possibly because of very different and sanitised versions of the story (such as Disney's), she sees this connection as a positive one ("are you the same sisters who fell asleep in each other's arms like the Babes in the Wood?") but this is not the case. Older adaptations such as Randolph Caldecott's (1879), have the two children not fall asleep but die after being abandoned by a man who is hired by their uncle to kill them. Thus the story deals with themes of death, abandonment, and some of the dangers of being a child. Although not referred to in the novel, there are also echoes of "Snow White" in this story.

and Gretel”, the home in such stories is an ambiguous space of both security and violence for children. Even before the commencement of the narrative, Star and Dolphin have been repeatedly subjected to displacement, constantly moving from house to house (or squat) in an attempt to avoid old boyfriends and debt collectors. While Star finds potential security in the home of a rediscovered father, Dolphin continues to live in an insecure environment with a mother who cannot see beyond her own wants and needs (in “Hansel and Gretel” abandonment happens when the parents believe that they will die of starvation if they do not leave their children in the woods to fend for themselves). Eventually, with the hospitalisation of her mother, Dolphin is exiled from the family home and placed, like her mother before her, into foster care. However, unlike the cruel foster mother that Marigold was forced to live with as a child (symbolic of the more common evil stepmother in fairy tales), Dolphin is instead placed with a wholesome, fairy godmother-like woman, Aunty Jane (more akin to that in “Cinderella”). Consequently, and despite the fears Dolphin has had over being in care, she is now finally able to find some protection and security in a new home before she is finally reunited with her sister and mother.

As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, Aunty Jane is the antithesis of Marigold, not appearing to possess any of the negative qualities which establish Marigold as a “bad” mother. She is, in other words, the saviour or fairy godmother: the opposite of a devouring and witchlike mother. Although Dolphin loves Marigold very much she still lets slip her desire to escape into a safe fairy tale world. In the chapter “Serpent” Star tells Dolphin that she is going to live with Micky and that Dolphin is welcome as well.

I thought about it, my head spinning. It was like one of those fairy tales. No, you don’t have to stay locked up with the wicked witch. This handsome prince has come along and he’s turned the two little beggar girls into princesses, even the scraggy ugly one, and they can all live in a new fairy castle together. Only Marigold wasn’t a wicked witch. She was our mum. (157)

Dolphin is torn in her feelings for her mother. On the one hand she is bound to Marigold by love and through the maternal affection and attention that Marigold is capable of providing. On the other hand, and at a deeper subconscious level, she expresses a desire to escape what is sometimes the prisonlike conditions of living with such a mother. In this sense Marigold adopts all three of the main roles that exist for women in fairy tales as well as in other types of children's literature: the good, kind, attentive mother; the cruel, abandoning mother (although often a stepmother in fairy tales); and the devious, devouring witch.

In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Zipes suggests the socialising/civilising purpose of the traditional fairy tale. He writes that the "morality and ethics of a male-dominated Christian civil order had to become part and parcel of the literary fairy tale" (9). I argue that in her critical rendering of the fairy tale, Wilson is herself subverting the patriarchal values that exist in these tales. This subversion is present in the revelation of the dangerous elements of the fairy tale and the parents' ultimate inability to provide the ideal of childhood safety and security. Wilson chooses to focus in particular on the story of Hansel and Gretel, one in which the father is pinned as the better parent who the children return to in the end (the evil stepmother often having died shortly before). The fact that the father is complicit in abandoning his children (again the fault of the mother) is forgotten. As mentioned earlier, Dolphin is cynical of this ending: "and it was like, wow, we're together again, one big happy family" (69). Dolphin's attitude towards the fairy tale ending, I posit, is representative of Wilson's own cynical (and rejecting) attitude to these ideological/pedagogical properties that Zipes sees as an integral part of the fairy tale. In a more literal subversion of male domination, Dolphin's and Star's fathers, although initially helpful, are eventually pushed into the background. While Wilson does initially assign (what may be considered negative and sexist) fairy tale roles to her female characters, the children are ultimately returned to their mother. The maternal is thus reinstated as the most important figure.

Finally, in making fairy tales such a focus of her narrative, Jacqueline Wilson can be seen to be critiquing a delusion that surrounds these tales. That delusion, I suggest, is that the fairy tale is intrinsically pleasant and safe – a bedtime story that will not keep children awake at night. While children such as Dolphin may still yearn at heart for a secure and happy home life with a quintessentially fairy tale (happy ever after) ending, they are savvy enough to recognise and remember the hurt that often befalls the characters of these tales before the story's end. For all the fantasy creatures that may be present, there is often an underlying postmodern idea in fairy tales which is, as Melissa Wilson and Kathy Short<sup>37</sup> write, that life is full of “competing truths and failed adults”. Such a representation within the narrative blurs a barrier that exists between traditional fairy tale endings and postmodern childhood truths. In doing so, Jacqueline Wilson can be seen to be exposing the almost mythic status of an ideal childhood home. Furthermore, she acknowledges, yet again, that young people are quite capable and tough enough to be exposed to the realities that such postmodern narratives present. If they are not already living a less than idyllic childhood (because most do not) they should be made aware and not shielded from knowledge of such. The children of *The Illustrated Mum* are certainly living this postmodern childhood in which parents are not always capable of providing the security and attention they require.

In my introduction to this thesis I mention the idea that the *Entwicklungsroman* text is inherently postmodern. Returning to this, I suggest that it is the presence of these postmodern parents that mark *The Illustrated Mum* as obstinately *Entwicklungsroman*. There is a clear sense that adulthood as a development endpoint is not necessarily a superior state to arrive at as a *Bildungsroman* text would assert. The presence of “competing truths and failed adults,” as mentioned in the above and the below, essentially undercut the importance of maturation. Furthermore, the idea that adulthood ultimately signifies maturation is undermined in the

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<sup>37</sup> I use first names here to distinguish between Jacqueline Wilson and Melissa Wilson.

narrative. This is evident in the presence of a mother who appears to exhibit less maturity and strength than her ten and twelve-year-old daughters. She, too, appears to be caught in the *Entwicklungsroman* process of “becoming” and not entirely certain of her identity, on one hand, because of her mental illness; on the other, because of the failed adults of her own childhood. In this case even the adult has not reached their developmental end point despite the fact that this is intended to be the desirable conclusion for ideological children’s literature.

*Mental Illness, Motherhood, and Identity: The “Other” Mother*

Motherhood is a complex concept within Wilson’s fiction with parents often either being absent or denied a voice in the space of her narratives. As suggested by Nicholas Tucker in *Family Fictions* there is “some inconsistency in Wilson’s stories between depictions of the desirability of mothers as all providing and always present for needy children and descriptions at other times of mothers as people who deserve their own life independently of their families” (82). Such a suggestion leads me to my discussion of Marigold as a character caught between the desires of agency and individuality; and of conventional motherhood and the difficulties that are experienced as a result of her attempts and failure to occupy both positions. Although I will say that this is a likely dilemma in many mother’s lives, in the space of this particular narrative, I argue that that this is both triggered by and a trigger for Marigold’s bipolar disorder.

As it is a central issue of the book, I want to begin this section by detailing some of the symptoms of bipolar disorder and how they are reproduced in the novel. Bipolar disorder is a complex mental illness, with symptoms and experiences differing from one individual to the next. However, in Wilson’s characterisation of Marigold, the condition is experienced as a pattern of manic and depressive phases. Such a pattern appears consistent with the term “bipolar,” which appears to connote a swing between the extremely high and extremely low. According to psychiatrist David Miklowitz, some of the symptoms of mania include: elated

and/or irritable mood states, increased levels of energy and activity, racing thoughts, flights of ideas . . . impulsive behaviour . . . distractibility and a decreased need for sleep . . .” (24). Conversely, the depression pole is characterised by “extreme sadness, the ‘blues,’ a loss of interest in activities a person would ordinarily enjoy . . . feelings of worthlessness, loss of energy and extreme fatigue . . . an inability to concentrate or make decisions, and suicidal preoccupations or actions” (24). The list of symptoms is extensive and goes beyond this, yet Marigold could be seen to exhibit all of the above over the course of this short book. During both phases she either oversleeps or does not sleep at all, she engages in impulsive behaviour: getting tattoos on a whim or spending up large, her moods rapidly cycling between elation, agitation, anger, and despondence. During her depressive phases she barely gets out of bed, shows little interest in anything, and during the climactic phases when she covers herself in paint, she refuses to walk or talk – effectively reducing herself to an infantile state (this state will be a subject of discussion shortly).

For the purposes of the narrative’s space constraints it is likely that Wilson is taking liberties in her depiction of Marigold’s mental illness. For example, her ups and downs are very frequent, at least within the space of the book, with very few periods of “normal” behaviour in between. This depiction of her bipolar disorder may be more consistent with what Miklowitz calls “mixed states,” a period in which some patients experience mania and depression simultaneously:

During these ‘mixed’ periods, patients experience periods of irritability, anxiety, suicidality, and feelings of worthlessness in conjunction with increased energy, activity, and impulsive behaviour. These high and low states can co-occur in time or alternate across days of the week. Mixed episodes take longer to stabilize with medications than manic depressive episodes. (Kupfer et al., 2000 qtd. in Miklowitz 25).

Furthermore, much of Marigold's erratic behaviour would fit better under the diagnosis of hypomania<sup>38</sup> rather than full blown mania which would require more immediate hospitalisation. Despite the fact that this complex rendering of bipolar disorder, I believe the purpose here is to compact the wide range of symptoms and their effect on individuals and families into the small space of this narrative.

Regardless of whether Wilson's novel can be considered an accurate rendering of bipolar disorder, its origins and impact in the novel are useful in analysis of the role of motherhood and individuality as Wilson frames it. Unlike Aunty Jane who is painted as almost fairy godmother-like, Marigold is pinned up as an example of an unconventional mother who is not there for her children as she should be. She clearly loves Star and Dolphin and her affection and desire to be a good mother are evident. However, the effects of her mental illness: her selfishness and inability to judge consequences, inhibit her ability to provide adequately for her children on most levels of parenting. It is these effects that help shape the narrative and demonstrate the differences between what is considered "good" mothering and what is considered "bad."

As discussed in the first chapter, David Elkind is an important theorist writing on the subject of family dynamics, imbalance and child/parent needs. Writing in 1994, just a few years before *The Illustrated Mum* was published, Elkind argues that there has been a shift from the needs of the child to the needs of the parent. Within a "postmodern family," as Elkind terms it, parents have been given far more lifestyle options (3). They also no longer feel solely responsible for the emotional needs of their children and as a consequence, "postmodern young

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<sup>38</sup> Hypomania describes a bipolar episode that is characterised by erratic behaviour but to a lesser extent than experienced during a manic episode. The APA Dictionary of Psychology (2007) describes a hypomanic episode as "a period of elevated, expansive, or irritable mood lasting at least 4 days and accompanied by at least three of the following (four if the mood is irritable): inflated self-esteem, a decreased need for sleep, increased speech, racing thoughts, distractibility, increase in activity or psychomotor agitation, and increased involvement in risky activities (e.g., foolish investments, sexual indiscretions), all of which affect functioning and are noticeable by others but do not cause marked impairment" (458).

people are often left without the social envelope of security and protection that shielded earlier generations” (8). While Elkind’s argument seems rather harsh towards parents of this era, could Wilson’s novel be seen as providing further commentary on such a reorganised and unbalanced family unit? The presence of a mother who puts her lifestyle of drinking and tattooing before properly feeding and clothing her children, who goes to bars leaving her underage children home alone fearing violent boyfriends and debt collectors, would certainly suggest that this is the case. As the remainder of this chapter will make clear, I find it somewhat difficult to discern whether Wilson’s novel supports a parent’s right to an identity and a life separate from their children. In this sense perhaps Wilson’s writing is reflective of this struggle to find balance between the needs of the child and the needs of the parent, the subject of Elkind’s work. Commentary or not, I feel it safe to say that Star and Dolphin do not receive all the care and protection they need from Marigold, something that is an important feature of both David Elkind’s postmodern family as well as that of Melissa Wilson and Kathy Short’s work, discussed in the previous section.

One of the factors contributing to Marigold’s position as “bad” mother and that is also a reflection of her inability to think of consequences, is her irresponsible attitude towards money. Marigold is unable to hold down a steady job (presumably because of her mental illness) and spends what little benefit money they have on alcohol. Necessities such as food and other bills are frequently ignored and the sisters are often made to live on dry cereal. During her hypomanic phases, Marigold’s dangerously irresponsible use of money peaks. In the chapter “Daisy Chain,” Marigold insists on taking Dolphin on a shopping spree before Dolphin reminds her that they have no money at which point Marigold presents her with a shiny new credit card:

‘But I thought... Star said you couldn’t use your credit card anymore.’

‘I got another one didn’t I?’ said Marigold, kissing the plastic edge of the card. She tucked it back in her pocket before I could see the name on it. ‘Let’s go shopping, Dolly. Please cheer up. I want to make you happy.’ (64)

Marigold’s desire to indulge, however, has the opposite effect on Star and Dolphin. They are perfectly aware of how much money Marigold owes people and are in a constant state of anxiety regarding the consequences: “she’d sort of borrowed them [credit cards] from people once or twice before. Star said she could end up in prison. Then what would happen to us?” (64).

Due to their great fear of going into care Star (initially) and Dolphin try their hardest to keep their family and Marigold together despite their mother’s abusive negligence and inability to provide. What precious little money the family receive is spent mostly on Marigold’s alcoholism.<sup>39</sup> Marigold’s abuse of alcohol leads to multiple inflictions of abuse on her daughters. Not only does she abandon them to go out drinking, causing the girls to fear whether she will return or not, but the act of purchasing alcohol denies Star and Dolphin sustenance as vodka comes before food in the Westward house. If one of the factors involved in a mother’s failure is the inability to feed her children, then Marigold has indeed failed.

Food, according to Carolyn Daniel and a great deal of psychoanalytic theory, is a symbol of the maternal.<sup>40</sup> Daniel writes that there is “a semantic link between the good mother and food/love/comfort and between the bad mother and lack of food/love/comfort” and, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, that “representations of food, especially sweet, rich foods, evoke the presence/body of the mother and produce feelings of comfort/love” (95-96).

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<sup>39</sup> Alcohol misuse is one of the symptoms of bipolar disorder according to Aldridge and Becker (32). Alcohol abuse is also mentioned by Miklowitz who writes that “Lifetime substance and alcohol abuse or dependence characterizes about 61% of all bipolar patients” (300, cited in Regier et al. np.) Miklowitz also writes on how bipolar patients use alcohol or other illegal drugs to “self-medicate” – for example, relieving the person from depression or helping them escape difficult situations in their lives (301).

<sup>40</sup> See again for example: Kristeva (1982), Chodorow (1978) and Irigaray (1981). These authors have been discussed earlier in my thesis.

While Marigold's inability to consistently provide adequate food for her daughters positions her as a bad mother she attempts to remedy this at one point by providing an overabundance of sweet foods. Early in the novel, Star and Dolphin return from school to find Marigold in the kitchen baking cakes and cookies after having left the girls at home alone the whole previous night. Marigold's actions are a clear attempt at redemption, a superficial way of convincing herself and her daughters that she is still a good mother. However, the fact that the food is sweet has negative associations. Writing specifically on *The Illustrated Mum*, Daniel suggests that these sweet foods' "evoke the mother and the rapport and the fulfilment of the child's primal relationship with her. However, too much sweet food is overwhelming, smothering, and produces disgust and abjection" (102). After Star leaves the house Marigold binge feeds Dolphin on her food: "I stayed in with Marigold and ate raw cake and unrisen cake and burnt cake until I felt sick" (51). While Marigold's intentions are still good, this smothering, guilt ridden style of mothering is representative of Marigold's general invasive presence in the lives of her daughters and, as Daniel further points out, her "excessive behaviours and neediness is threatening because it hinders Dolphin's separation from her" (102). Thus, both "good" and "bad" mothering (defined by how well mothers are able to provide in all senses of the term) can be considered potentially dangerous to the child.

There additionally seems to be a definite connection between Marigold's mental illness and her desire to be a good mother which also presents itself as a threat. As Marigold is in the process of baking, Dolphin thinks to herself, "I knew by the gleam in Marigold's eye and the frenzy of her fingers and the kitchen clutter that Marigold wasn't really right at all. This was the start of one of her phases – but I couldn't spoil it" (45). There are clear lines between Marigold's condition and motherhood (suffering at the hands of her own neglectful mother as a child) and her "phases" throughout the book, with her desperation for a whole and happy family becoming increasingly evident as her condition worsens. Moreover, Dolphin's thoughts

suggest that her desires parallel Marigold's own. She realises that there is potential danger in Marigold's actions while in such a state but she is simultaneously drawn to this rare display of mothering and the element of maternal comfort that is symbolically offered by cake and cookies.

While the adolescent per se is not the focus of my analysis here, I want to mention how Star exhibits a child's need to differentiate, to separate from the maternal and to become an individual through the ways in which she interacts with her mother. In Kristevan terminology, Star engages in the process of abjection early in the novel. In her refusal to accept her mother's food she symbolically spits it back in her face and, in effect, refuses the maternal. Star makes the rejection of her mother clear at this stage: "you act like you're Mega-Mother of the year making lousy cookies. Well, count me out. You can have my cookie. And I hope it chokes you" (44). In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva writes that "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (2). According to Kristeva, rejection of food represents rejection/separation from the mother or father (3). In this sense Star throws Marigold's mothering back at her. Additionally, the words "I hope it chokes you" are suggestive of the idea that Marigold is herself choking on the maternal, that she has not been able to separate from her own past. Part of Marigold's desire to be, if not Mega-Mother, at least a decent one, must surely stem from a need to be better than her own mother. It is not entirely evident whether Marigold's mental illness has been triggered by her mother abandoning her, but it is clear by the end of the story that she has been harbouring a great deal of anger towards her:

'I had to do this stupid talking thing today. It's supposed to make me feel better and stop me drinking. It didn't make me feel better, I felt much worse. I was sick, but they still wouldn't let me go back to bed. They went on and on asking me stuff about when I was little, so in the end

I blurted out all sorts of ugly things about my mother and all she'd done to me and how I hated her. Then I realized, I'm the same. I've done some of the same stuff to you.' (291)

Marigold is evidently unable to protect her children from the repetition of her own traumatic childhood. Despite her obvious anger, however, it could be suggested that Marigold's behaviour does stem from the unnatural, forced separation she had from her mother as a child. One symptom of her mental illness is the repetitively infantile state that Marigold lives in. Throughout her phases, Star and Dolphin are forced to assume the role of young carers for their mother, effectively taking over her role. In the space of the book these role reversals seem completely natural to the characters:

'Yes, I'm the mum and you're my little girl Marigold. Dear, dear, you've got yourself in such a silly state, darling. Let Mummy wipe your nose again, 'I said. 'Now come along with me, there's a good girl. I'll tell you a story as we go, right, precious?'

'Yes, Mum,' said Marigold in a little girl's voice. (148)

Marigold's infantilisation could be considered indicative of the separation from her mother and the lost opportunity to individuate and mature. As a result, Marigold tries to reclaim her childhood at the expense of her children's. Yet again the characters' exhibit their place within Elkind's postmodern family dynamic in which the parent's needs come before the child's. Essentially, all three characters face abjection and are, as Martha Westwater writes of Katherine Paterson's characters, "cast off, dispirited, and degraded, principally by parents who exploit their children, starve them emotionally, and stifle their creativity" (69). While we never learn Marigold's exact childhood experience, it is evident that her early relationship with her own mother and subsequently being "cast off" shapes her adult self and her own way of mothering. When Marigold undergoes therapy and is fully able to understand the extent of her issues with

her mother, the act of being sick is symbolic of her own experience of abjection. Effectively, it could be seen as a physical display of the psychic expulsion of her own mother.

Continuing on with the subject of Wilson's portrayal of motherhood as well as its connection with mental illness, Carolyn Daniel writes:

She [Marigold] tries to be a good mother but fails miserably. This failure is symbolized in the narrative by the imperfect cakes and cookies she produces. Her realization that she will never win Star's father back and that Star has left her to go live with him, results in her mental breakdown. There are no roles other than motherhood for women in Wilson's narrative...Implicit in Wilson's discourse is the notion that being a wife and a mother is a woman's only role/function. Failure to perform this role satisfactorily results in depression and exclusion from society. (103)<sup>41</sup>

While Daniel's discussion of Wilson's characterisation is somewhat harsh and could trigger a whole new analysis of Wilson's conservatism, for now I will apply Daniel's reading to my own in further discussing motherhood, mental illness, and identity.

The discovery that Star and Micky have left for good is what finally tips Marigold completely over the edge. What follows is a disturbing scene in which Dolphin wakes in the night to find her mother standing in the bathroom, covered in white paint which she herself has applied:

I put out my hand to touch her, to see if it were real.

‘No. Don't. Not dry yet,’ said Marigold. ‘Not dry. Wet. So I can't sit down. I can't lie down. I can't. But that's OK. It will dry and so will I. And then I'll be right. I'll be white. I'll

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<sup>41</sup> Oliver's mother (who is given no other name) also seems to be afflicted by this connection between mental health and imagined success as a woman/wife/mother. As a result of the breakdown of her marriage she too seems to have suffered a breakdown. She is prone to headaches which keep her in bed much of the time and appears overly protective and clingy towards Oliver and irritated by his friendship with Dolphin. While her part in the narrative is small it may reinforce the above connection.

be a good mother and a good lover and Micky will bring Star back and we'll be together for ever and ever, a family, my family, and it will be all right, it will, it will, I will it, it has to be better. It couldn't be worse, this is a curse. But it will be better better better, no more tattoos, Star hated them, she hated me, but now they're gone, until the laser, could I use a razor? No, too red, I want white, pure light, that's right...'

She went on and on, muttering weird half rhymes to herself. I stood shivering beside her. She had gone really mad now. Crazy. Bonkers. Bats. (206-207)

This passage clearly establishes a position for Marigold. She has, in her opinion, failed in her role as a mother and lover and therefore, as Daniel suggests, has failed as a woman, leading her to a complete breakdown. In trying to assume the role of "good" mother/lover, Marigold effectively erases herself. The act of covering up her tattoos eliminates the aspects of herself which she believes are involved in her position as a "failed" mother. Through whiting herself out she seeks to return to a state of conservative purity and goodness that she sees as desirable. If tattoos are considered a form of identity performance, then their covering/removal may be symbolic of the obliteration of this identity. For Marigold (prior to her breakdown), tattoos are exceptionally important and tell a story, "I love my tattoos. They're all so special to me. They make *me* feel special" (12). However, eventually she decides that this form of identity performance and the recognition of other aspects of her life are secondary to the importance of being a good mother (you cannot be/have both) and thus, such an alternative identity must be eliminated.

The significance of Marigold's tattoos alongside her positioning as a mother and woman warrants further analysis within this chapter. Tattoos are a display of identity but they are also, depending on the time and culture, a mark of otherness. Despite modern western culture's relative tolerance towards tattoos, to have a large number may still mark the individual as "different" or "not normal." Marigold, by this standard and because of her mental illness,

does not fit within the boundaries of normal. The large number of tattoos that cover her body are both loved and loathed by her daughters. Star in particular is disapproving of the tattoos, telling Marigold that “They make you look like a circus freak” (12). Even Dolphin, who is still in awe of the colourful pictures, realises their significance in adding to Marigold’s position as othered and “abnormal”:

I came out of school the next day and there was Marigold, waiting for me. She was standing near the other mothers but she stuck right out. Some of the kids in the playground were pointing at her. Even Owly Morris blinked through his bottleglasses and stood transfixed.

For a moment it was as if I’d borrowed his thick specs and was seeing Marigold clearly for the first time. I saw a red-haired woman in a halter top and shorts, her white skin vividly tattooed, designs on her arms, her shoulders, her thighs, one ankle, even her foot. (57-58)

Marigold’s tattoos reiterate and reinforce her place as an othered spectacle, her otherness already having been assigned because of her mental illness. Star, who appears desperate to gain a more “conventional” mother, recognises that Marigold’s tattoos are a barrier to this: “You said it was sick and pathetic getting yourself tattooed again and again. You said you’d save up for laser treatment to get them removed” (11-12). After she calls Marigold a circus freak Marigold responds:

‘I don’t care. I don’t have to conform to your narrow view of society, Star, I’ve always lived my life on the outside edge.’

‘Now you’re just sounding like some corny old film. Why can’t you act *normal*?’ (12, emphasis in original)

Evident in this dialogue is the idea that one cannot be tattooed and normal and in particular a normal mother. Christine Braunberger writes that “Women’s tattooed bodies have always presented a dilemma for a culture bent on women’s silence . . .” (4). If this is the case then,

unlike many of Wilson's other mothers who are depressed, removed, deceased and consequently silenced, both Marigold's body and personality are loud. If tattoos present a dilemma for the silencing of woman, then through painting them over Marigold effectively silences herself. It is clear here that Marigold also seems to believe that tattoos and being a good mother and woman are not analogous and so the tattoos must go: "I'll be white<sup>42</sup>. I'll be a good mother and a good lover. . ." (206).

In the above I have described Marigold's act as one of self-obliteration. Christine Wilkie-Stibbs has suggested also that "by this act of attempting to obliterate her tattoos that are the collective narrative of her life and focus of self-definition, she has also obliterated her performance of self" (59). Tattoos have been the subject of a variety of conflicting discourses with regards to their ability to represent the self. Writing on this subject, Nikki Sullivan's work employs a variety of theories in an attempt to understand how the tattoo is read from such different perspectives. Ultimately appearing to favour the opinion that tattoos are a positive form of decorative identity expression, Sullivan's work is also interested in how tattoos have been theorised as markers of deficiency/deviance (in traditional psychiatry) as well as defiance (in Foucauldian theory). Here, I will analyse some of these discourses which I feel are at work in Wilson's construction of the tattooed mother.

Sullivan cites psychiatric theory in her discussion of tattoos as a symbol of feelings of incompleteness. Such theory posits that "the desire for such prosthetic devices as tattoos stems from feelings of inferiority, alienation, insecurity, and displacement, which are at once both cause and effect of an underdeveloped ego. . ." (18). The subject of Sullivan's criticism, Psychiatrist Gerald Grumet argues that multiple tattoos are "an expression of personal

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<sup>42</sup> Whiteness is associated with purity which in turn is associated with virginity. While mothers are clearly not virgins, Shari L. Thurer writes that there is still a certain amount of sexlessness expected of mothers. "Sex and motherhood have not mixed well since the demise of goddess religions, when men began to split women into madonnas or whores in every sphere. Presumably a good mother extinguishes her libido with conception or else expels it along with her placenta in childbirth" (xx).

incompleteness tied to a perennial but elusive quest for that one further design that will make [the tattooed subject] feel complete” (490). Grumet also suggests that tattoos are commonly found on schizophrenic individuals as well as lawbreakers (490) thus negatively tying mental illness with criminality, the individual who deviates from the law with that which deviates from the psychologically “normal.” Criminal behaviour is not covered in detail in Wilson’s narrative, however, it is clear that Marigold has either committed fraud or theft when she obtains yet another credit card (although Dolphin calls this “borrowing” in a likely attempt to disguise her anxiety). Criminal behaviour aside, Wilson’s framing of mental illness (as characterised by Marigold’s constantly changing mental states) and tattoos may negatively position Marigold within Grumet’s discourse on identity fragmentation and confusion. In any case, Marigold’s behaviour and tattoos are clearly represented as deviating from the “norm.”

While such deviance may be read negatively, I also argue here, as does Sullivan, that in deviating from what is considered normal, tattoos may also symbol defiance. In the previous chapter I discussed within Foucauldian theory, the ways in which the individual’s body is tied up in a system aimed at controlling and normalising that individual. I suggested the ways in which both overweight and underweight individuals become the objects of the Panoptic gaze, and, in deviating too much from that which is considered the “normal” body, become spectacle. Like the over/underweight body, the tattooed body also becomes spectacle because, as Nikki Sullivan suggests, it evokes “ambiguous feelings of fascination and fear” (183). Citing Braunberger, I earlier noted the way in which tattoos may present “a dilemma for a culture bent on women’s silence. . .” (4). In “speaking”, the tattooed female body effectively defies such a

culture of silence. It also defies the constraints put on the female body which is expected to be passive and (in Foucauldian terms “docile”<sup>43</sup>).

When Marigold and Star argue over Marigold’s tattoos early in the novel, Marigold suggests her position as living (at the time) happily outside these social and corporeal constraints: “I don’t have to conform to your narrow view of society, Star, I’ve always lived my life on the outside edge” (12). Up until the point of her breakdown (where she finally appears to succumb to the need to conform) Marigold is accepting, even inviting of the sometimes negative attention that her many tattoos draw. However, when she paints herself white, she is finally inducted into Foucault’s disciplining institution<sup>44</sup>; both metaphorically, in her conformity to what she believes is a normal appearance, and literally, in being admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Ironically, this institution strips this conformity paint from her skin, exposing the tattoos which are a mark of her alternative personality. Such a perspective suggests that Wilson does support such markers of identity which initially appeared to be counteractive to good and conventional mothering. It is only when the tattoos are exposed that Marigold can return home with her children and (hopefully) resume being not just a mother, but a woman with a personal, if complicated, identity who also provides a mothering function.

Braunberger’s article further suggests that the tattooed female body is one of “revolt” or that it represents an “aesthetic revolution” (1). Tattoos are part of “larger struggles over the author(ity) of women’s bodies” (3). In positing such, Braunberger further elucidates the way in which the tattooed female body may be seen to subvert Foucauldian systems of (particularly patriarchal) power. If this is the case, then the inclusion of a tattooed mother may constitute the author’s own attempt to break through such constraints. In the novel, it is the mother’s attempt

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<sup>43</sup> A discussion of the docile female body appears in chapter two of this thesis. Theory on the (female) docile body stems from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punishment*. Although, as suggested in my previous chapter, Foucault does not focus on the female body, his work is the subject of a great deal of feminist analysis.

<sup>44</sup> See *Discipline and Punish* p. 231

to return to what she considers a desirable and conservative state of motherhood (through making herself white) that ironically means she is unable to mother her children. At the end of the novel Marigold is still in hospital but now stripped of paint. On seeing that Star has had her nose pierced, Dolphin observes how Marigold “carried on like she was the most uncool conventional mum in the world, with virgin skin. I looked at her, my illustrated mum. I knew she really did love me and Star” (292). This ending suggests that while Dolphin recognises that conventions exist, she also recognises that a lack of convention is not necessarily detrimental to Marigold’s ability to love her children.

The above section demonstrates the difficulties implicit in reading Wilson’s illustrated mother. It is, as always, up to the reader to decide whether Wilson is being conservative in suggesting what makes a “good” mother, or if she truly provides a space for alternative mothers with a separate identity who are deserving of lives apart from their children. While I acknowledge that a reading of Wilson’s work as inherently conservative is very possible, I choose to argue that her writing ultimately suggests that unconventional mothering is not incongruous with “good” mothering (the definition of which remains indefinite). I also believe that Wilson’s work implicitly addresses the child/parent needs imbalance, the subject of David Elkind’s analysis. I have argued further in this section, that the subject of tattoos in relation to identity is a difficult one with a variety of conflicting opinions. In this case, I choose not to take a definite stance on whether Wilson’s work represents tattoos as identity performance/confusion or deviance/defiance. Instead, I argue that Wilson’s writing may reflect its context, that is, the ambiguous feelings regarding tattoos which existed in the 1990s and continue to exist to this day. As Sullivan and Braunberger suggest, the tattooed body (like the anorexic one discussed in my second chapter) excites both fear/horror and fascination. Attitudes towards tattoos may be more liberal today than they have been in the past but, in my opinion, these marks might still induce hesitation in the unmarked, especially as the number of

visible tattoos increases on an individual. In this sense, Wilson's rendering of the tattooed body and the tattooed maternal body in particular is a representation of the times and conflicting feelings and is thus not intended to be discriminatory.

*An Ambiguous Ending and the Postmodern Family*

As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the ending of *The Illustrated Mum*, like that of *Falling Apart*, is particularly ambiguous with the characters' ultimate recovery remaining questionable at the end of both novels. I posit, as I have done before, that this is a reflection of the real world in which there are many uncertainties and situations may never be entirely resolved. The family are back together but Wilson makes no attempt to suggest that this equals an idealised fairy tale happy ending. Despite her regrets, Marigold remains suspicious until the very end, convinced that the hospital staff are poisoning her. This suggests that Marigold has not completely recovered (such an illness cannot be completely cured and only treated carefully) and thus her daughters are very likely to have to deal with future relapses. However, like Elkind's postmodern children, Star and Dolphin must accept this and realise that their needs will not always come before their mother's because this is a reality of the post nuclear family. Sonya Hartnett asserts that hope and sugar coated endings are far from necessary requirements in literature for the young and to think otherwise is

an insult to an audience that may be young, but is considerably tougher than may imagine . . .

Young people read books hoping to recognise themselves in the fictional world, and they would soon lose patience with fiction that ignored the facts. (11)

In depicting characters as she does, Wilson acknowledges that these "postmodern" families exist. Suggested, is the idea that just as her characters are forced to grow up before the end of their official childhood, readers should also not be shielded from such realities.

As a result of the above I have categorised *The Illustrated Mum* as an *Entwicklungsroman* narrative. This is, in part, a response to what I see as a rejection of ideologies that serve the interests and superiority of adults and mark maturity into adulthood as an essential end point. As I have suggested, the postmodern qualities present in the novel often betray the adult's position as saviour of children who, according to Katherine Capshaw Smith, are figured as the "ultimate victims of trauma, those who require above all adult protection or guidance . . ." (116). While adults may provide some assistance, ultimately it is up to the child to get themselves through difficult situations.

What connects the two sections of this chapter is the idea of the postmodern home/family as presented in two different theories. My first section introduced Melissa Wilson's and Kathy Short's idea of a children's literature postmodern metaplot in which "the child's journey is to construct a home within a postmodern milieu complete with competing truths and failed adults" (130). "The postmodern child has the responsibility to sort out the complexities and ambiguities of the adult-made world" (133). I posit that such a description of the postmodern child is apt for the portrayal of Star's and Dolphin's lives and their relationship with Marigold. A major feature of this narrative, I also discuss the reference to fairy tales and that the ideal of the fairy tale ending is ultimately exposed as a ruse in light of its demonstrably postmodern qualities which both child and child character are capable of deciphering.

My second section drew on David Elkind's concept of the postmodern family, suggesting that Wilson's narrative reflects the struggle to find balance between the needs of the parent and the needs of the child in such families. Here, I have attempted to move away from a mother blaming theory that has been a point of critique in other areas of this thesis. While Marigold may not be able to provide for her children as she should, I believe that Wilson is sympathetic, making it clear that her behaviour stems from her mental illness and own difficult childhood and she is not simply a selfish individual. I am critical of Daniel's belief

that “there are no roles other than motherhood for women in Wilson’s narrative...Implicit in Wilson’s discourse is the notion that being a wife and a mother is a woman’s only role/function” (103). While it is impossible to say that Wilson does not hold these beliefs and reproduce them in her work, I argue that in such a case it is more likely again that Wilson is reflecting on her child characters and readers. For these children, their mother, more often than not, is the primary woman in their life, a woman who is often at the centre of the child’s desire for love and attention. Ultimately, I believe that Wilson does provide a space for alternative mothers who are quite able to have separate needs and identities without this impacting on their ability to care for their children. A struggle nevertheless, exists between a desire for an “ideal” nuclear family of a bygone era (which has now achieved almost mythic status) and the harsh realities of Melissa Wilson’s, Kathy Short’s and David Elkind’s postmodern life. Children of this era, defined by Wilson’s work, need to recognise that parents will not always be there for them and that home will not always be a place of comfort and security.

## **Coda: Defining the Voice in Jacqueline Wilson's Work**

This thesis, as posited in my introduction, represents an attempt to address what I see as a gap in the study of children's and young adult literature. Why Wilson's work has been so neglected in academic writing is unknown to me. The fact she has won so many awards (2005 Children's Laurette, 2000 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize among many others), says something about the impact her novels have on readers. Nicholas Tucker suggests that, "unlike *Harry Potter*, her books have not proved equally popular in America, so denying her the status of universal bestseller, but in Britain her popularity is beyond doubt and has been so for some time" (69). Perhaps it is this lack of universality that has resulted in a paucity of critical academic study. I am not able to account for levels of popularity in New Zealand. However, on a personal note, another motivation in choosing this subject was in response to my great love of Wilson's fiction when I was growing up (not to mention many other girls at my primary school who shared that love), thus making this a somewhat nostalgic project.

I do not pretend to remember, so many years later, the exact appeal of Wilson's fiction when I was a child. As a result, I will not be so bold as to say, as Tucker has, that "Wilson gets the child voice so right" (72). I think it is impossible to make such a claim except from the perspective of an adult who has certain but not necessarily accurate ideas about this voice. A reader response review could perhaps yield a better indication of the accuracy of the child's voice according to the target audience, but such a study is beyond the scope of this thesis and also does not appear to be a part of Tucker's work. In saying this, I do not want to follow Barbara Tannert-Smith's lead in making such suggestions as that the adolescent (or child) voice can never be "truly authentic" when in the hands of adult authors (395). Tannert-Smith's assertions stem from Trites' argument that "children's literature tends to 'delegitimise adolescents'" (Trites 83 qtd in Tannert-Smith 395). I think it is fair to say that the child or

adolescent's voice can never be truly authentic when written by an adult, but to say that this ultimately delegitimises youth is, in my opinion, not true (Tannert-Smith appears to conflate the above in the first paragraph of her article). I stated in my introduction that I hoped to prove that Wilson's texts are more than simple vessels of ideology. While I believe that a text can never completely remove itself from ideology, I hope to have demonstrated that Wilson goes beyond a simple perpetuation of values that serve the interests of adults and "delegitimise" children and adolescents.

A further concern of this thesis has been the way in which Wilson's work fits in with theory on trauma narratives. I have acknowledged the apparent complexities involved in a realistic and ethical portrayal of traumatic subject matter. Keeping this in mind, I have attempted to show the ways in which Wilson's portrayal breaks away from the problems that Tannert-Smith sees as inherent in trauma narratives for the young. Using Laurie Halse-Anderson's young adult novel, *Speak*, as a model, Tannert-Smith asserts that such novels seek to "convey to an adolescent reader her childishness in relation to lived trauma while simultaneously modelling possible solutions to it . . ." (396). I have argued that Wilson does not condescend to an overall exhibition of the "childishness" of both her characters and her readers (although to say that her characters always behave maturely would be false). Nor do I agree with the statement that trauma narratives insist on "modelling possible solutions," as I hope to have demonstrated in my discussion on models of recovery. Challenging Tannert-Smith's opinion, my intention has been to alternatively prove that Wilson's work represents an acknowledgement of the maturity of the child and their ability to handle the difficulties inherent in the process of growing up. Wilson does not seek to reinforce the idea that traumatic experience necessarily reaches an end point with recovery. She also does not insist that the child requires an adult to reach such an end point which would further reinforce the superiority and importance of adults.

As a result of the above factors and as suggested in my introduction, I have placed the above novels in the category of the *Entwicklungsromane*. I treat such a category as ultimately more empowering to the child/adolescent protagonist in its refusal to mark maturity and adulthood as a necessary end point. The traditional *Bildungsroman* insists on its protagonist's maturation and eventual initiation into the world of adults. In doing such, I argue that the *Bildungsroman* text undermines the child, insisting that they must strive to become the (superior) adult. On the other hand, I read the *Entwicklungsroman* text as representative of a "process of becoming" in which "becoming" is not necessarily symbolic of movement into adulthood. Instead, I argue that it symbolises the development of character rather than the development of maturity. Lastly, I suggest that in its failure to demand maturity and ultimately adulthood as the ideal end point, the *Entwicklungsromane* is inherently postmodern. The postmodern world, as Melissa Wilson and Kathy Short argue, is "complete with competing truths and failed adults" (13). If this be the case, then in it is fair for children in such *Entwicklungsroman* texts to be suspicious of the promises of adults and the promises of adulthood.

The ambiguity of the above narrative conclusions, I believe, represents further rejection of *Bildungsromane* principles. Trites suggests that the *Bildungsroman* movement is "from error to truth, from confusion to clarity, from uncertainty to certainty" (11). Having covered the subject of Wilson's ambiguous endings and questionable recovery, I think it fair to say that there are no such clear cut resolutions. In fact, from a somewhat cynical postmodern perspective, I am inclined to question and perhaps even reject the idea that truth, clarity, and certainty are really possible. If this is the case, then the *Bildungsroman* ending is ultimately a myth. While this opinion stems from my reading of Wilson, further consideration is, again, beyond the scope of this project.

Overall the purpose of this thesis has been to consider the ways in which Wilson's work deals with some of the traumatic experiences and problems that exist in growing up. I suggest that in placing her protagonists and their families in a postmodern landscape, Wilson subverts (some of) the ideologies that assert the inferiority of children and adolescents. In acknowledgement of Tannert-Smith's arguments this thesis does not pretend to ignore the realistic and ethical complexities which exist in writing literature for children and adolescents. Neither does it ignore the fact that ideology is implicit in all literature, no matter how detrimental this may be. However, to take Tannert-Smith's assertions too seriously would demand that we give up children's/young adult literature and its study since it is impossible for adults to "authentically" understand and write the perspectives, thoughts, and voice of the child or adolescent. In writing this thesis, I hope that I have been sensitive to the child and the issues that are at the core of growing up. Additionally, I hope that I have been successful in asserting that Wilson is also sensitive in her handling of these difficult issues without being patronising. I admit that this project has only succeeded in covering a small selection of issues. However, in doing so I hope further to have demonstrated ways in which Wilson's work can be critically engaged with and approached from various theoretical perspectives and thus prove the worth of her work for future study.

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