

*Lost Children: Hearing the Past in the Silence of an Empty House**

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Received: 30/11/2016. Accepted: 28/04/2017

How to cite this article: Muñoz González, Esther. "Lost Children: Hearing the Past in the Silence of an Empty House." *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies* 38 (2017): 47–63.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.38.2017.47-63>

Abstract: This article analyses Maggie Gee's novel *Lost Children* (1994) from the combined perspectives of feminist and trauma theories. It contends that the sudden disappearance of the protagonist's teenage daughter triggers a psychological quest for the recovery of her voice and self, shattered by a traumatic experience she had in her childhood. My analysis, which pays especial attention to narratological issues —since this barely perceptible, insidious trauma is expressed both formally and thematically— shows that Alma's behaviour is representative of the worries, expectations and impositions that contemporary children and women are subject to in western society, still imbued by patriarchal models and rules of behaviour.

Keywords: trauma; gender roles; psychological quest; identity; motherhood.

Summary: Introduction. Narratological reflections: Subjectivity in the novel. Alma as trauma victim. Conclusions.

Resumen: El artículo analiza la novela *Lost Children* (1994), de Maggie Gee, combinando dos perspectivas: la feminista y la de los estudios del trauma. El estudio sostiene que la inesperada desaparición de la hija adolescente desencadena el viaje sicológico de la protagonista. Este va encaminado a la recuperación de su voz e identidad, que habían sido destrozadas por una experiencia traumática en su niñez. Mi análisis, que presta especial atención a los aspectos narratológicos de la novela —pues el trauma, apenas perceptible e insidioso, se expresa a la vez formal y temáticamente— muestra que el comportamiento de Alma representa las preocupaciones, expectativas e imposiciones de las que son objeto los niños y mujeres en la sociedad occidental, en la que aún predominan los modelos y reglas de comportamiento patriarcal.

Palabras clave: trauma; roles sexuales; búsqueda sicológica; identidad; maternidad.

Sumario: Introducción. Reflexiones narratológicas: subjetividad en la novela. Alma como víctima de trauma. Conclusiones.

* This paper has been possible thanks to the funding received from the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (FFI2015-63506-P), the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF, H05).

INTRODUCTION

Lost Children (1994), Maggie Gee's sixth novel, narrates the story of Alma and the events that destabilised a supposedly solid upper-middle class family. Alma is fifty years old. She lives an apparently perfect life with her family of four: her husband Paul, her son Adam and her daughter Zoe. But one day her beloved Zoe leaves home, without an explanation, only a note:

Dear Mum and Dad, I have to go away for a bit. I know you wouldn't understand. Don't try to find me. Don't worry about me. I've taken the money from my Post Office book. I'll be all right. Give my love to Adam. I know you'll be upset. I do love you. Zoe.

PS I can't help it, I have to go. (Gee 1995: 8)

This incident breaks Alma's world and triggers her desperate quest to understand what had happened to cause Zoe's flight and, consequently, a search for her own identity. Her rage and sadness leads Alma to throw Paul out of the house and, with Adam already living on his own, the seemingly perfect family is broken. Alma struggles between incredulity, guilt and incomprehension in the course of a psychological journey into her own past, looking for reasons to explain her behaviour and the feeling of being lost. The purpose of this essay is to analyse Alma's search for her lost daughter from the perspective of Trauma Studies, with the aim of demonstrating that this search is in fact a psychological quest for the recovery of her lost childhood, voice and self, stolen by a traumatic event that can only be heard in an empty house, without the sort of distractions and obligations which traditionally burden women in patriarchal cultures, with special attention to narratological issues since this barely perceptible, insidious trauma is expressed both formally and thematically.

1. NARRATOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS: SUBJECTIVITY IN THE NOVEL

The story in *Lost Children* is told by an external narrator that focalizes mainly through Alma's perspective and recounts her actions and thoughts. The fact that the narrator is external —or “heterodiegetic” in Gérard Genette's terminology (1980: 244–245)— and has access to the minds and thoughts of various characters, allows us to describe it as a narrator with variable focalization or, as Genette called it, “narrative instance” (1996: 172–174). Only in three of the forty-two chapters (17, 26 and 32), does the

narrator shift the focus onto Paul's thoughts and actions and only once (Chapter 31) onto Adam's. These techniques for rendering the characters' train of thought, "prompted by the unprecedented importance given to the language of consciousness" (Cohn 1978: 111) in twentieth-century novels, are, by definition, essential elements for a proper understanding of the characters' feelings. The focus on the characters' mental and emotional lives fosters the readers' empathy and affective identification with their psychological struggles. According to Anne Whitehead, trauma novels mimic the symptoms of trauma: "temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection" (2004: 3). Moreover, there is a "close connection between content and form" (Nadal and Calvo 2014: 7) in trauma novels, inviting an in-depth consideration of narrative strategies which help "readers to access traumatic experience" and internalize "the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience" (Vickroy 2002: 1).

The use of italics —a device already used by William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)— is the chief manner in which the narrative instance in *Lost Children* neatly presents the division by which Alma is torn when it enters her mind and renders her thoughts. Italic s are used to indicate Alma's self-soliloquising and, so, to enhance her self-fragmentation: "She told herself sternly. Why am I so horribly critical? *But why can't he see I don't want him to stay?*" (Gee 1995: 166–167, italics in the original). This quotation is very illustrative of the way in which the narrator grants readers access to the internal soliloquies between the two facets of Alma's split self. Adam, her son, is visiting her and she cannot avoid being critical and even nasty to him. One part of Alma feels ashamed of her disruptive behaviour, while at the same time, her angry inner self still justifies her coldness. First the third-person narrator alerts the readers that it is entering Alma's mind: "She told herself" (166), and then tense and person change to the present and the first-person. The use of italics helps readers realise that what is being recorded is Alma's dialogue with her internal other; on the one hand, her rational and educated side: "Why am I so horribly critical?" and, on the other, her angry "friend. The other Alma" (110): "*But why can't he see I don't want him to stay?*" (167, italics in the original). All these devices enhance the impression of fluidity, whether of Paul's, Adam's or Alma's stream of thoughts, as can be seen in the following quotation:

And the children, she [Alma] thought. Up there on their own. With men like him, so obviously lonely. It doesn't bear thinking about, does it? So we

don't think about them, and they go on suffering ... Unless it's true that their innocence protects them. That incomprehension is a kind of wall. That's what I need, incomprehension ... I'm one of the available, the walking wounded. Especially if they're tender. Especially if they're warm ...

As if she had been born to look after them.

As if it were ... *one of the family*.

As if when they were there she stopped existing, as if she had lost her right to exist.

And I become nothing. I lose myself ... (111, italics in the original)

In this quotation, the narrator alerts the readers that it is entering Alma's mind: "she thought," and then reports her association of ideas through "quoted monologue" (Cohn 1978: 58), triggered by the disquiet provoked in her by the appearance in the swimming pool of the lonely man she mentions in the first line. If the novel is "a eulogy of childhood" (Kılıç 2012: 90), it is also a critique of all the factors in our society that deprive children of their most elemental rights and make them victims of our contemporary times. What follows is the concatenation of Alma's free association of ideas as she is making them, from the potential damage the lonely man could do to the children, without anybody paying attention —"Up there on their own. With men like him, so obviously lonely. It doesn't bear thinking about, does it?" (Gee 1995: 111) — to her own relation to the situation that has triggered her train of thoughts:

"Unless it's true that their innocence protects them. That incomprehension is a kind of wall.

That's what I need, incomprehension (...) I'm one of the available, the walking wounded" (111).

So Alma feels unprotected, an available victim, an adult without the innocence which could guard her from potential aggressors. Then the narration changes again to the third person and to free indirect discourse or narrated monologue in Dorrit Cohn's terminology: "As if she had been born to look after them", to finally return to the first person, in only a few lines: "*And I become nothing*" (111). The use of italics marks the eruption of her inner voice demanding to be heard, reminding her that something wrong happened in her past.

1.1. All the Lost Children: Social Concerns in the Novel

The excerpt mentioned above also signals another issue that the novel openly addresses from the very title. *Lost Children*, as Mine Özyurt Kılıç argues, seems in its title an allusion to the poems about lost children which appear in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789) (2013: 89). As this allusion suggests, the novel draws from the Romantic tradition in its consideration of children as closer to nature and more insightful than adults because "a child has not yet rationalized and assimilated the workings of society the way an adult has" (Metz n. d.: n. p.). Alma herself was a lost child. The loss of innocence and eventual recovery of memories parallels the dynamics in the sequence of Blake's "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found" with the difference that Alma's quest is aimed at the healing of her psychological trauma.¹ But in *Lost Children* every human being is a lost child, both in the metaphorical and the literal sense of the word: "[there are] millions of them [lost children]. The uncountable lost ones" (Gee 1995: 7). Zoe, Alma's missing daughter, is the most literal example of the disappearance of a child in the novel, but there are other 'lost' children: Those children who live in a society that does not offer the same opportunities to the offspring of the lower classes, allowing them to be unprotected and neglected, the same unjust society that pretends to be blind when some of its citizens lose their way and become homeless.

The homeless people affected by governmental housing policies are as abandoned as the children in the swimming pool. Alma only becomes aware of their existence when she starts working at Portico and Sheen, and observes them gathered around her office. Like many other middle-class individuals, Alma does not see the homeless as normal people with problems but as people who were "encroaching on the places where *normal* people lived" (Gee 1995: 130, italics mine). Only when she considers the idea that her beloved Zoe could be living on the streets, does she begin to think of them as 'normal' human beings, but even then, she is "glad to stop thinking about the homeless" (124). Her change of perspective ironically presents the hypocrisy of the middle class pretending that the homeless do not exist, being blind to their presence on the streets, waiting for their

¹ The quest undertaken by the little boys in Blake's poems differs from that of Alma in the sense that Blake's children represent the human soul seeking God the Father in a sin-wrecked world and that, in the second poem, the child is helped to return to a state of safety thanks to the intervention of God the Father, who leads him to his mother. Unlike them, Alma has no one to help her in her life quest.

disappearance. Through Zoe, the novel insists on the ease with which the boundary between homelessness and middle-class security and affluence can be crossed, and brings to the fore Maggie Gee's social concerns, so central in her works.

1.2. *Lost Children* as a Recreation of Demeter's and Persephone's Myth

In her review, Michèle Roberts defines *Lost Children* as "the most elegiac of Maggie Gee's novels to date," and she labels Alma as "a heroine who is irritating and not very likeable" (1994: n. p.). Another reviewer, Angela Neustatter, considers that Alma's crisis and contradictions are typical of those "suffered by many middle-aged women" (1994: n. p.). From a mother's perspective, the end of childhood implies losing a child, and also somehow ceasing to be a mother, that is, the end of childhood involves the appearance of 'lost' mothers. Women who were mothers enter a new phase in their lives with the growing up of their offspring in which they gain freedom and the possibility of devoting more time to themselves. If they envision the new situation from a positive perspective, women can be "at least as effective, sensual and vital as they were in earlier decades, and possibly more so with children out of the way and all the time in the world to devote to working hard and having fun" (Neustatter 1994: n. p.). However, in a negative light, it is also the stage in which women lose fertility and harbour fears of losing their sexual desire and attractiveness, in short, their youth. Alma is so exclusively dedicated to motherhood —only as Zoe's mother— that she fears the void that will appear when she is no longer needed. This mother/daughter bond has also been appropriately understood by Michèle Roberts as a recreation of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone (1994: n. p.).

Following the same line of thought, Karin von Harman has stated that, "though Demeter is never mentioned in Gee's *Lost Children*, the novel is clearly a take on the ancient story" (2012: 147). This critic underlines the relevance that the cycle of seasons is given in the novel, since Zoe's disappearance occurs in Autumn and she returns home in midwinter, a seasonal time which "coincides with a regeneration of nature" (147). Alma also links Zoe's physical appearance with the harvest and thus with nature when she describes her: "Her hair in those days was golden brown, harvest gold, thickly plaited, the generous gold of plaited bread" (Gee 1995: 24). However, von Harman questionably goes on to say that, while in the myth Demeter's "grief is not so much in having lost 'her baby' (...) as in having

lost her companion,” what we have in the novel is a mother entertaining “maternal desires to find in the daughter a companion or an equal” (2012: 147). According to von Harman, these are “less discussed desires that can exist alongside (traditional) desires to control or subsume the daughter” (147). Von Harman’s reading presents the desire of kinship as an unusual element in the mother/daughter relationship but it does not take into account Alma’s complete identification with her daughter, which goes well beyond the desire of companion or affinity. The identification of mother and daughter is also an important element in the seasonal myth, as it originally considered Demeter and Persephone two different stages of the same seed/crop: Demeter the ripe corn/crop of the year and Persephone the seed-corn. As Sir James Frazer puts it in *The Golden Bough*: “In this way the Persephone of one year becomes the Demeter of the next” (2000: Chapter 46, n. p.). According to this mythical reading, Alma so deeply identifies with her daughter that she only lives through her, all her desires and aspirations are focussed on Zoe, leaving aside any personal desire or plan for the future. Unable to recall her past due to her childhood trauma, and without a plan for the future, Alma only lives in the present time, through Zoe, almost as if she were Zoe.

2. ALMA AS TRAUMA VICTIM

Even though both Roberts and Neusttater are right in their description of Alma, they ignore the primary reason for her breakdown, the departure of her teenage daughter being only the second psychological shock that brings to the surface a forcefully repressed earlier trauma. As the novel progresses, Zoe’s disappearance becomes almost a background preoccupation for Alma because, as Karin von Harman rightly argues, “motherhood is not the main culprit of her lack of secure ego boundaries” (2012: 148). This interpretation of repressed childhood trauma as the true subject matter of the novel was reinforced by Maggie Gee herself when she acknowledged a special interest in the effects of repressed memories: “I have always been very attracted to the psychoanalytic concept of ‘the return of the repressed’, because it seems to me eminently true of my own life” (Gee 2012: 271). Alma’s traumatised condition is expressed in her constant remarks about her split self, in sentences such as: “underneath, another voice whispered, nibbled: I like to be selfish, but I don’t know how” (9). The significant discrepancy between Alma’s egotistic inner self and the self-sacrificing persona she perceives as external to her is present from the first pages of the novel and exists before

Zoe's flight. But it is only when her preferred child goes away that Alma's inner voice gains strength and force. Without the presence of the only object of her concern in the last sixteen years, Alma is for the first time entirely aware of the existence of an inner disconformity with her life, and ready to acknowledge her anger and the inner gap —between what she consciously recalls from her childhood and what really happened— that has existed throughout her life. This realisation triggers in Alma a turning inward and a quest for the truth in her past: ““Help me! Help me!” Alma screamed to no one, turned away from Paul, turned inward, sobbing” (8).

For as long as she can remember, Alma has been trying to fulfil the model she was raised to be: an “Angel in the House” to her husband, a perfect mother to her children, and a good daughter to her mother. However, in an imprecise moment of her life as an adult, “the other voice was born” (Gee 1995: 10), an inner voice that questions, rebels against and criticises Alma's accepted vital assumptions, a little voice that “rage[s] in her skull” and reminds her that she has never done what she wanted to do, has never had fun (11). This split self, this fragmentation of the self into parts, is a well-documented symptom in victims of traumatic events. As Sandra L. Bloom explains:

Traumatic experience produces a physiological overload that the brain and body are unable to manage adequately, preventing us from continuing to function normally. Our primary defense to cope with this physiological overload is a mechanism (...) called ‘dissociation’ (...) a primary response to traumatic experience (...). It allows us to transcend, to escape from, the constraints of reality and in doing so, it allows us to tolerate irreconcilable conflicts. (2010: 200–201)

Alma's inner voice exists in total opposition to the decisions she makes in life. It questions the perfection of her family of four and points to some insidious idea lurking deep inside her consciousness: “families aren't so great, the little voice grumbled. And this family isn't so wonderful either” (Gee 1995: 10). As this quotation suggests, Alma's inner voice directs its anger towards model families; it keeps telling Alma that she was unhappy in her childhood and that, “her family had become her life, replacing whatever had nearly been born when she managed to escape from her first family” (13). She intuits that something was wrong in her parental family, something that was repressed under a screen constituted by her own family. When Zoe

flees, it makes Alma's self crack, and with it the protective cover over her traumatic past: "and time broke down" (13).

As happens with many victims of psychic trauma, Alma is unable to remember what happened to her, but she is haunted by the past; she knows that something dark and wrong happened in her childhood. As Cathy Caruth explains:

The traumatic nightmare, undistorted by repression or unconscious wish, seems to point directly to an event, and yet, as Freud suggests, it occupies a space to which willed access is denied. Indeed, the vivid and precise return of the event appears, as modern researchers point out, to be accompanied by an amnesia for the past, a fact striking enough to be referred to by several major writers as a paradox. (1995: 152)

After asking Paul to leave home, Alma remains alone in the house where she had lived as a child, and where, as she now begins to think, she "had been bad, had been punished ... Forgotten sins, long folded away" (Gee 1995: 31). Her current loneliness vividly reminds her, through association of ideas, of her solitude as an only child and how she had always blamed herself for her mother's —Gwen— unhappiness: "guilty because her mother wasn't happy as a better daughter might have made her happy" (32). Given the fact that psychic trauma "does not appear in conscious memory" (Luckhurst 2008: 4) but is rather repressed in the unconscious, and that the narrator focalises the events through her, the true nature of Alma's trauma is not openly addressed in the novel but hinted at in her train of thoughts or conversations with her internal other, written between lines, so to speak. Alma, following the pattern of many victims of trauma, does not remember the origin of her unrest on a conscious level, partly because she has repressed the awful knowledge and partly because her memories have been manipulated by her mother.

2.1. Perpetrators

Gwen worshipped Alma's dead father, and, so, had always concealed the truth about his relationship with his daughter:

Owen was 'Father' to distinguish him from Daddy, Alma's real father, Jack. She was only four when Daddy died. The older she got, the more she longed to remember him. But all she could recall was a warm dark tenderness,

a yielding, something absolute and mysterious. He wasn't peppery or strict like Owen — she half knew that, and had often been told it. The years with Daddy were the Golden Age. *Gwen had told her so, and Alma believed it.*

(...) 'Jack doted on you, Alma. Worshipped little girls.'

Loved them to death. And you — you would have died for him. You would have done anything for my Jack.' (Gee 1995: 33, italics mine)

Even though she is trying to defend Jack/Daddy, there is something sinister in the way Gwen describes him. It seems that language betrays her and expresses much more than she is ready to transmit, at least at a conscious level.

She told her that she adored her Daddy but Alma does not remember "anything ... real" (Gee 1995: 34); all she knows is the version learnt from her mother. Gwen, like most women of her generation, had a patriarchal understanding of life —she totally submitted to both her husbands— and was unable to admit in her rigid scheme of things that her adored first husband was abusing their toddler. Through repression, Gwen had erased from her memory the slightest hint of suspicion about Jack/Daddy, even though we can reasonably infer the opposite from her narration. As Karin von Harman rightly explains, "[t]he novel becomes ever more insistent in its hints of childhood incest and Alma's journey becomes a search for the truth about that abuse" (148). The day Alma's Daddy died, the little girl, who was only four years old, said: "Can we go home, just the two of us? Will he never come back again?" (34). Little Alma was clearly indicating relief about her father's absence. But Gwen's reaction was to take sides with the dead man, punishing her daughter and using this story in the future as proof of her selfishness. The result was that Alma was traumatised and the fact that her mother did not help and believe her —a very usual reaction around and within the family circle of victims— aggravated her state. In Sandra L. Bloom's words:

Trauma produces dissociation, leaving us vulnerable to posttraumatic intrusive experiences that begin a cycle of continuing deterioration. Other members of our social group, who could theoretically promote healing and recovery, instead tend to avoid their own internal disruptive response by avoiding the victims so that victims may be tapped in a complicated dilemma, in which they can maximize their social acceptance only at the expense of their personal adjustment. (2010: 210)

Gwen had always succeeded in avoiding recognising and condemning her first husband's unacceptable behaviour. She had always made Alma feel guilty about being selfish and disobedient. Thus, she grew up learning to put the other's needs always first: "There was something wrong with her [Alma]. She couldn't say No" (Gee 1995: 63). And now in the narrative present, when Alma is 50 years old and her daughter has left, she wants to stop trying to please her mother and needs to speak to her. As she reflects: "I shall make her give back whatever was lost, I shall make them give up what was taken from me. I could go back and find it. Be whole again" (36). At this stage, Alma is aware of her self-fragmentation and wants to know the whole story of her childhood: "*When did I lose my innocence? Who did the thing that was done to me?*" (111, italics in the original). She needs her mother as an empathic listener, the "witnessing 'other' that confirms the reality of the traumatic event" (Laub and Podell 1995: 993). But Alma's dreams point to the shocking possibility that it was not that Gwen did not believe her, but rather that she was fully aware of the situation, acted as passive accomplice of her husband and was, therefore, a co-perpetrator, guilty as well as Daddy for either consenting or failing to stop abuses:

THE NIGHT BEFORE she went to Wales, Alma dreamed about her mother and father (...) She came out crying in her pajama top, realizing too late she had forgotten her trousers. 'I can't sleep here. There isn't a bed.' 'You're just being difficult,' her mother said (...) 'Then you'll have to sleep with Mr Edberg,' Gwen said. 'I'm sure there's plenty of room in there. Do you know how to get babies? Dirty girl,' and the terror began to rise in Alma, the terror of what was behind the door, and it drove her upwards, trying to wake as her mother pushed her back into the room (...) (Gee 1995: 201)

Gwen's priorities had always been her two husbands, their comfort and happiness, and whether conscious accomplice or not of the abuse, she would have put her husband's honesty first: "It was only men that Gwen protected from the facts. Alma was her daughter, and she let her have it" (Gee 1995: 34).

Nevertheless, if she is to heal the wound, Alma needs to construct the complete narrative of her childhood, which would allow her to be the owner of her story. As Laub and Podell explain, "when a person is subjected to a trauma the only way he can maintain a connection between self and internal other is by exercising an inner capability to shape and order the coercive 'facts' that confront him" (1995: 998). Even now that Alma is a middle-aged

woman, she fears that her boss, Mr Crowther, will not believe her and take her side when she is almost assaulted by a client (Gee 1995: 85). When she is explaining what happened with this man, Alma hears in her mind her mother's voice chiding her: "*Don't be rude, Alma, You upset Mr Crowther. Surely you could have been nice to our friends?*" (85, italics in the original). But on this occasion Alma is believed; she finds in Mr Crowther an empathetic listener that does not doubt the veracity of what she says. Alma feels comforted by the thought that: "she would find her voice. Here she could avoid the old mistakes" (86). This reflection points to the core of Alma's endeavour: to find her voice, to build a whole identity, without cracks.

Alma keeps investigating, trying to reconstruct and fill in the gaps in her traumatic memories of her childhood, and this is why she travels to Wales in order to visit her aunt, Eileen, and her mother, Gwen. It is her aunt who starts demolishing the ideal image that Alma's mother had built of Daddy. Eileen did not like him, he was an alcoholic and a womaniser and Gwen would probably have been better without him (Gee 1995: 231–232). But when Alma tries to find out her mother's version, she still staunchly defends Daddy's honesty, even though, as Alma reflects, her words "sounded as though she meant the opposite" (235). Alma eventually realises that Gwen is unable to accept the harsh truth about Daddy, that the truth would "tear her in two" (236). And she also realises that she will never get any information from her mother. For years, Gwen had managed to live in an idealised past and if she is awoken from her dream by force, she will be permanently damaged. When Alma tries to talk with her mother of the past, her reaction is very demonstrative of her present fragility: "Gwen clutched at herself, a ball of frail bones, unimaginably small, her face animal, contorted, braying out terrible bursts of harsh tears which drew from Alma a horrified pity" (236). Alma chooses to protect her elderly and lonely mother from the traumatic memories she is so eager to recover, even though she is still unable to love her unconditionally. And she realises that she shall always need Gwen, "because she contains my past" (239). Initially, Alma believed that Gwen was pretending her amnesia, but as aunt Eileen explains to her: "People get old, and they do forget. Sometimes they have to forget, to get by. They get too old to do the work of remembering" (231). Whereas for Gwen traumatic dissociation is the only way to survive, Alma needs to recuperate her repressed and dissociated memories in order to work through her trauma. Both reactions are understandable according to Henry Krystal because, as he argues: "in old age (...) our past lies unfolded before us, and

the question is, what should be done with it? The answer is that it must be accepted or one must keep waging an internal war against the ghosts of one's past" (1995: 78). Gwen has accepted her past but instead of feeling the "need to talk about the events of the traumatic period," she has "a need to avoid doing so" (81). It seems that the only way she is able to deal with the past is by consciously forgetting her permissiveness in her daughter's abuse, pretending it never happened. Now in her old age, she is only able to accept one reality, her idyllic version of the past.

However, it is not only about Gwen's happiness and the past that Alma feels guilty. She has had time to reflect on her own role as a mother. Openly, she is able to recognise her possible influence on Zoe's decision to leave home: "it's my punishment (...) I must have interfered too much" (Gee 1995: 108), but once and again she lies to herself about the way she treats her son, Adam. Everybody around Alma repeatedly calls her attention to the fact that she still has a son who needs her love and, although she tries "to feel tenderness instead of irritation" (166), there is something in her son that provokes her absolute rejection. This something is his physical appearance: "his generous red lips (...) they reminded her of someone — not Paul's lips, not my lips, lips she did not entirely like" (166). Adam is handsome, very tall and blond; he looks very much like Alma's Daddy and, although Alma is unable to remember her childhood suffering, her unconscious prevents her from feeling any tenderness and love for her son, even though she tries. She feels guilty about mistreating her own son, but soothes her remorse by telling herself once and again that Adam is an adult and does not need her, that he is well. Only when Alma faces the fact that her son has tried to commit suicide does she start to behave as a loving mother: "'I'm sorry, Adam,' she whispered, touching him, touching his hand which lay spread out, open, ready to receive whatever she would give. 'I'm really sorry' — but that wasn't it, she realized as she tiptoed away, and she turned and said, slightly louder, 'I love you'" (312).

2.2. Working through Trauma

In her first counselling therapy session with Paul, Alma bitterly complains that her voice had never been heard and that she "used to feel I hadn't got a face (...) I felt I didn't exist" (Gee 1995: 261). She recounts an occasion when Father, Gwen's second husband, mistreated her and the word "abuse" (262) runs on out of her mouth. For the first time in her life, Alma considers the possibility of having been harassed by her biological father,

Daddy. But it is only when the adult Alma somehow relives a similar experience with a handsome, blond and tall man who calls her “a sweet little girl” (305) in the middle of a sexual encounter, that she is able to recover the ownership of her whole self. She ferociously exerts her right to say ‘No’ and mend the past through the present. In the past, when Alma was abused, she was only four years old and had no real possibility of defending herself; consequently, her reaction was to repress the emotions provoked by the awful experience and dissociate the knowledge of it. As Bloom points out:

If the emotional state is so paralyzing that individuals cannot adequately protect themselves by either fighting or fleeing, then the only option they may have open is to separate from—or dissociate—from emotions entirely. This is particularly true for children in frightening situations who are physically unable to fight back or to run away from the source of the danger. (2010: 204)

When the attempt at sexual harassment is repeated in the present, Alma is an adult and takes control of the situation. Once she acknowledges her presence within it, she can decide. She hears her inner self telling her that she is the owner of her living self and body, not a submissive object. As she reflects: “*my body, mine, my living self*, it did have walls, it was complete” (Gee 1995: 307, italics in the original). Yet, guided by the model of behaviour she has followed all her life, she instinctively says “I’m sorry” (307) when the blond man reacts angrily to her rejection. But her inner voice firmly pushes her to assume the ownership of her body and mind: “*But you mustn’t say sorry*” (307, italics in the original) and Alma says in her own voice: “I don’t want to do this” (307). She respects and defends her body’s desires and expels the bad memories from her: “It had pushed him away. It [her body] had finally spoken” (308). Her body reminisces past events or situations during which it could not speak. With the recovery of her memories, she recovers her will and wholeness of body and mind. Now that she recalls the story of her childhood, she can overcome her trauma and can love her son because, as her inner voice reflects: “[if] *I can love him, I can break the pattern*” (315, italics in the original). And she understands at last that “[t]hat was the secret. *Love allows ... love allows us to be ourselves*” (315, italics in the original). As the combination of italics and roman type suggests, it is at this point, when Alma realises the crucial importance of love, that the fragmentation of her self comes to an end. Only by loving her son as such, instead of seeing him as a living replica of her Daddy, will she be able to assume the past and live towards the future.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, *Lost Children* is not only the story of Alma, an angry and unsatisfied middle-aged woman who suffers from the absence of her daughter, and of the impact of this event on her family. It is the story of the physical, intellectual and mental efforts a grown-up woman has to make in order to redeem the abused child she was and incorporate her traumatic past into the present. A little girl's voice and truth were ignored by all, even by herself. It was a voice never heard and believed, waiting to be listened to and claiming to speak aloud in the house where the adult Alma lived as a child. Alma's is a story about how the past conditions the present, and about the need to remember even the worst experiences in life, because personal identity is only whole and sound when we are the owners of our story. In the novel, Maggie Gee makes clear that love is the only solution, the powerful force that unifies a broken self and the only bridge which can alleviate isolation. But in order to be able to love someone else, one must first love oneself. As my analysis has attempted to demonstrate, Alma eventually succeeds in recovering her capacity for self-love and love for others when the circle of traumatisation, acting out and working through is closed. At least a lost child, Alma, has been found.

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