The Female Dialectics of Loss and Laughter: Mothers and Daughters in Lorrie Moore's Fiction

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This alone is what I wish for you: knowledge.
To understand each desire and its edge,
to know we are responsible for the lives
we change. No faith comes without cost
(Rita Dove, “Demeter’s Prayer to Hades”)

That dance you taught us—
I’ll learn its language in my body:
lift and flail to beat the grain
from the husk, remembering to save
some to return to you, remembering
that I will return here, a seed.
(Nan Fry, “From Persephone’s Letter to Demeter”)

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I. Introduction

Although the fiction of American novelist and short-story writer Lorrie Moore has consistently drawn attention to the limits of language in its capacity to communicate the pain involved in daily struggles, it also envisages the many ways in which words do actually convey the underlying feelings of the ordinary individual. Exploring the means that channel these feelings, one stands out as both the most effective and self-deprecating alike. When, in one of her essays, Moore reflects on life as "an amazing … gift" and yet "intolerable" (Moore, *See What* 59), she hints at the other distinctive hallmark of her storywriting: the need for everyday humor to impregnate life so as to make it bearable. In fact, Moore's comedy has been associated with Beckett's—it was suggested that "Moore, like Samuel Beckett, sees that nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (qtd. in Raiffa 384)—because both their works show with stunning artistry how laughing about terror can be the only way to keep some balance over life's wrongs. Suffice it to say, if Beckett laughs at unhappiness through a dramatic array of characters that are for the most part men, Moore does the same through a heterogenous cast of mostly women characters.

Indeed, the American form of this tragic yet laughing life in its literary shape scrutinizes "marriage and family" in their pathological aspects, as Moore herself argues (*See What* 216), and it is her wide range of female protagonists the main characters that embody the story's common underlying handling of inner struggle. Criticism of her fiction has no doubt assessed the major role that female characters play in the whole of her writing, while some research has discerned the relevance of motherhood for those characters in family contexts. And, although her fiction examines the exclusively female interaction that stems from the prominence of women characters in her writing, and, more specifically, the female dialogue originating in the mother-daughter dyad that stands in the limelight of several stories, little has been suggested about the inner dynamics of such

interplay and its narrative evolution in her prose. There is certainly a clear thread running throughout her work that specifically features women protagonists involved in the maternal experience. Her first short story volume, *Self-Help* (1985), not only comprises a series of manual stories addressed to or focalized by women straining to keep love relationships going, but also encompasses a particular short story, "What Is Seized," that transcribes the narrator's efforts to remember her mistreated and now deceased mother. Likewise, her first published novel, *Anagrams* (1986), depicts Benna struggling to find balance between her real and make-believe life stories by relying on the indulgent invention of her daughter. Later publications prove Moore's persistent interest in this bond: the short story entitled "Which Is More Than I Can Say About Some People," from *Birds of America* (1998), and the last story, "Thank You For Having Me," within the latest volume, *Bark* (2014), put the focus on the strains of a daughter and a mother, respectively, when interacting with their troublesome female counterparts in the family.

In the particular staging of these female networks, the deep sense of solitude after the absence or the loss of those they most lovely need impel these women to escape their ordeals by looking for their female other in the familiar nucleus—either in the memories of those who are or in the imaginings of those who never were. Within the purview of this paper is to examine the early and later literary depictions of the daughter-mother bond in Lorrie Moore's fiction, specifically where this plays a key role in the stories of her female protagonists. Its goal is to assess how the representation of such relationship evolves throughout her work as seen in the main character's former and longed-for, current or imagined interaction with her female counterpart, analyzing the way in which this interplay contributes to the narrativization of her life story and, thus, her identity construction. This networking thesis is tested to support a politics of female creativity,

liberation and narrativity engendered within women's voice and experience in the traditionally patriarchy-oriented space of the family as it is portrayed in Moore's work.

The following pages feature the development of such discussion. The paper is sectioned into five chapters, including this Introduction. While next chapter reviews the theoretical framework that sets the literary background to the study of Moore's comic yet heartfelt depiction of the mother-daughter bond, Chapter III delves into the analysis of the already mentioned novel and short stories involving this familial dyad. The final part of the essay draws the main conclusions from the piece of research and the thesis proposed, and the ending chapter attaches the works cited throughout the paper.

II. Theoretical background

a. Humor and performativity in women's contemporary writing

In her introduction to *100 Years of the Best American Short Stories* (2015), Lorrie Moore dramatizes the literary workings of short-story writing by becoming herself a character. She swops the first person for a third-person narrator that, if one has read any of Moore's stories, should not be surprising when it argues that "[t]hough it is [the woman writer's] own story, she sometimes feels like a minor character within it" (Moore, "Introduction" xiii). At a conference, when asked if being a writer was her dream job, "she starts laughing and cannot stop. She places her head down on the lectern, attempting to collect herself but keeping her eyes open to look for a glass of water" (xv). One could indeed remark that such a self-reflective, self-deprecating female character-writer sets the tone for Moore's storytelling and that of many of her contemporary comic women writers.

It is in the postmodern context, with its questioning of grand narratives of knowledge and the effectiveness of human language as a means of communication, where humanity has found laughter the most suitable vehicle to convey the era's desperation—

and the only way of surviving it: fun. Many critics have certainly conflated humor and postmodernity: Olson thinks that "[t]he curious phenomenon of humor is central to the postmodern enterprise" (Olson 4) and Pye gives reasons for it: "the comic has become a dominant mode in which to express … existential absurdity and human suffering" (Pye 55). One of the forerunners of postmodernist argumentations suggested the relevance of the comic at the onset of the critical wave: Ihab Hassan introduces laughter as an "anarch[y] of the spirit" that may be able to improve life (29). In fact, Pye's instance that "comedy masks and unmasks sites of anxiety" (60) drives him to view textual humor as an enriching mode for identity construction and deconstruction in contemporary literature. One could wonder what can hold a closer relationship with human identity than the exploration of the self through the "laughing at oneself, [the] finding oneself ridiculous" (Critchley 95). The functioning of humor questions the self by putting it in front of the mirror, by defamiliarizing its automatized existence. According to Critchley, the effect of strangeness is two-fold: while it returns us to common sense by forcing us to see what our world looks like (18), the distancing from our own life compels us to realize the harsh fact of our loneliness, in which we are doomed to live (88).

Late 20th century feminist comics have forged the definitions of a gendered type of humor that, inherent in women's specific diction, sets free a self-realized female identity. Women have always been commanders of a type of humor "informed by and speaking to the experience of being a female in a world where that experience is devalued" (Barreca, "Trouble" 9). American humorist Barreca formulates a gendered understanding of comedy whereby women writers of humor are actual storytellers who employ comedy to channel the anger against a social history that silences our voice. While firstly seeming to conform to the style conventions that define comedy as a distinguished genre, female comedic writing actually overthrows the same conventions, as Barreca

discusses ("Introduction" 9): most humorists have certainly agreed on associating women's comedy with Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia and the carnivalesque as part of his discussion of laughter in *The Dialogic Imagination*. In it, Bakhtin views carnival as a powerful source of comedy through which unofficial culture is explored. While carnival finally embraces back societal codes in Bakhtin's discussion, Judy Little argues that "women use this carnivalesque spirit to pose a more lasting challenge to the status quo through a … double-voiced discourse" (qtd. in Fuchs 5). Barreca thus takes a step further Critchley's consideration of jokes as "anti-rites" that "deride the ritual practices of a given society" (Critchley 5) by positing such mockery as women's most natural expression towards effective identity formation. Women acquire a new sense of autonomous self by telling and acknowledging jokes by other women:

> Humor continues to serve a crucial function in women's lives: it helps them realize they're not crazy and they're not alone … Knowing that you're not the only one experiencing something takes the misery out of commiseration: to laugh at something is to drain the fear out of it. (Barreca, *Snow* xxxvii)

One of the most outstanding differences between men's and women's humor remains in the subject targeted: while the male comic tradition deals with superiority theories conveyed through other-mockery, women's jokes have traditionally showed a self-deprecating humor seen as properly feminine. Thus, while Critchley's remark that "[t]he object of laughter" should truly be "the subject who laughs" (4), women are just too used to that. Instead, Barreca suggests a positive view on comedy that may "elevate and explore rather than denigrate or hide your feelings" (*Snow* 201).

Barreca's theorizations of women's comedy are filtered by her assumption of female humor as part of a larger gendered view of women's language taking root in the feminist agenda. Cynthia Willett articulates comedy by precluding gender-specific

identity stereotypes, and posits a new kind of female intersubjectivity: as she assays, "[c]omedy can create a new kind of temporary community, not based on homogeneity or rigid identities, but rather on a shared dislocation out of the customary lines of identity" (Willett et al., "Erotic" 229). Walker, on her part, puts the focus on the subversiveness of women's comic writing, concluding that those humorists that do not express feminist protests also challenge the patriarchal structure and at the same time redefine gender (qtd. in Fuchs 9). Despite differences, all these critics seem to agree with Barreca's examination of the kind of humor produced by women as part of an essentially feminine strategy in women's language: "When women speak, we speak as women" (*Snow* 183).

It follows that, when we laugh, we can't help laughing as women; this is, heartily, feared by the male gaze that averts itself from us—medusa-like. In her illuminating essay, Hélène Cixous celebrates the female body, its contortions and its laughter as the original touchstone of women's feminine writing. Cixous views women's fluid writing as a mirror of the sexual female body, and women's laughter as an emasculating agent as well as a trigger and reflection of women's pleasure. Accordingly, woman must convey meaning through her body and return to an unpunished idea of her own sexuality as a premise to produce texts distinctly feminine, this writing about women and femininity in turn releasing women's bodies to the expression of their sexual desire. Certainly, *L'écriture feminine* reproduces the movements of the woman's body: in the same way that in her speech she "lets go of herself, she flies" (Cixous 881), her writing "is never simple or linear" because the singing voice is always resonating in her body (881). The laugh of the medusa and its multiplying effect in the body lead us to recognize women's unlimited physicality: understanding the feminine body as a writeable palimpsest, "that part of you that leaves a space between yourself" (882), the body welcomes women's potentiality for polyvocal, fragmentary identities and their interplay through time and space (889).

Picturing the uninhibited way whereby the female individual will free her bodily energy in order to feel, write, and stage her symbiotic self, Cixous also sheds light on the performative aspect of women's gendered self and diction. This is also encompassed by Judith Butler's perspective on gender performativity, contextualized within the field of phenomenological act theories. Phenomenology analyses the way in which the body becomes the site of perception of and interaction with the space that inscribes its existence. Butler's enlightening contribution to the field, however, aims to deconstruct the dyadic understanding of sex and gender. The notion on the body advanced by existentialist philosopher Merleau-Ponty, which Butler paraphrases as "an historical idea but a set of possibilities to be continually realized" ("Performative" 521), drives her to elaborate her view on woman and femininity as contingent ideas comprising "historical product[s] which have become conjoined and reified as natural over time" (525). As such, gender becomes a rehearsed performance conveyed through the body: an object reified by the conventions that perceive it as ascribing or not to the heterosexual norm, and an embodied subject that acts its own body complying with or contesting those proscriptions.

Both Butler and Cixous expose the restricting social identifications existing in what the latter termed "phallocentrism" and what Butler describes as the "heterosexual imperative" (*Bodies* 18). Where Butler may be seemed to disagree with both Cixous' recognition of a unique feminine writing is precisely in the essentialist kernel that the latter confers to the female experience: as Butler pinpoints, such differentiation "clearly improves upon those humanist discourses which conflate the universal with the masculine" ("Performative" 530). However, all critics appear to find a common place in the relevance of women's multiple stories: it is not the overgeneralized "woman" but representations of women what is on the table. Moreover, the phenomenological approach pays attention to the power of the female body as an experiential entity, and searches to

depict woman's position and the potentialities. Woman's traditional image clarifies how her interaction with her own body and its relation with space are not only objectively constrained by her culture but also subjectively limited by her own sense of restriction. Consequently, Young notes that female bodily behavior displays an "inhibited intentionality"—the severing of what she aims and what she eventually enacts (146). Woman, thus, "retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world's possibilities" (Young 148).

i. Humor and performativity in Lorrie Moore's short stories and novels

> Jokes were needed. *And then the baby fell down the stairs.* This could be funny! … To ease the suffering of the listener, things had better be funny. Though they weren't always. And this is how, sometimes, stories failed us: Not that funny. Or worse, not funny in the least. (Moore, *A Gate at the Stairs* 251)

"[T]he more painful the experience, the likelier she is to make it the subject of a joke" (Kelly 1). Alison Kelly's words tracing the evolution of Lorrie Moore's comedy exemplifies the assertion of Tassie, the nanny protagonist of Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), in the most enlightening way: the feeling that stories are useless in relieving pain if they do not cause a guffaw on the face is something that Moore's mastering joke-tellers and storytellers seem to understand. This is why even babies falling down the stairs can possibly be the subject of laughter—even of women's laughter. Indeed, some criticism has considered Moore's as a literary work that delineates an American panorama of specifically middle-class white women trying to adapt to the expectations set in love relationships and family networks. Rightly, Moore's work shapes stories always from the female protagonist's perspective in her three published novels— *Anagrams* (1987), *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital* (1994) and *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009). Moreover, the reading

of her short story collections confirms the cardinality of the complex experiences lived by women in the late 20th century and early 21st century, which has led criticism to approach her short stories and novels from feminist standpoints.

In this respect, Kelly catalogues Moore as a non-doctrinaire feminist (151) who fashions women characters with ambivalent feelings towards manifestations of feminist thought. Certainly, Moore depicts the multifarious identities of her women protagonists confronting themselves with the contradictions they find in feminist practice. Adrienne in "Terrific Mother," the last story in *Birds of America,* confesses to her friend Kate that perhaps "there's something wrong with the words feminist and *gets the guy* being in the same sentence," to which Kate gives her own account of becoming economically independent: "I paid for the house; I cooked; I cleaned. I found myself shouting, 'This is feminism? Thank you, Gloria and Betty!'" (Moore, "Terrific" 160). This example accounts for the kind of female portrayal Moore populates her narratives with. Her fiction describes how narrow views on feminism have developed into conventional images that aggravate female conflicts, the incoherence of which women face with a mixture of wonder and mockery. As a result, Macpherson warns against analyzing Moore's prose from categorically feminist perspectives (567): she argues that her depoliticized insight into gender inequality as well as the comic approach to feminist stereotypes reveal the status of feminism as a narrative whose artificiality is exposed. One would be seen too maladroit to approach Moore's narratives in the light of feminist comedy—and certainly too naïve to think the latter has overlooked its own attempts at mockery.

Barreca opens the door to a self-parodying kind of feminist humor whose subverting effects are also to be taken as a feminist dynamic: by its very questioning, parody enhances its modes of representation. As she suggests, "if the women's movement is going to survive, it has to gather the courage to laugh at itself" (*Snow* 186). Moreover,

like part of Moore's overarching humor, Willett's enterprise pursuits making fun of feminist ideas when they have become dogmas: "a touch of self- irony serves as a corrective to any moralizing, self- righteous tendencies of our own that might lead to a feminism that is toxic" (*Uproarious* 23). And what is, if not feminist, Moore's capturing of her female characters' dimensionality and complexity, unique characters that break out of all uniform thought—even that of feminism? By sliding away from conventionality, she places her fiction on an autonomous arena where she can express her independent thoughts on women's movement without dispensing with her comedy, which indeed dissects women's economic and emotional strains in late 20th century patriarchal society.

And, if, in her own words, the kernel of her short stories and novels is eventually sad (Moore "lolz"), then hers can be traced down to much of feminist comedy as well. Certainly, all kinds of comedy seem to be rooted in tragedy but Barreca places special emphasis on women writers' refusal of happy endings in a work of fiction that is nonetheless comic ("Introduction" 10). In Moore's narratives, it does become clear that life is not very funny: marked by the loss of past significant human ties, it is her characters who are funny by getting alive through word-play, self-deprecation and make-believe as a means to deal with the solitude resulting from roads untaken or companies unkept. Much of the pain moving the reader comes from self-deprecating humor, which Barreca deems an essential part of a stereotypical feminine discourse. Defusing a "situation by turning ourselves into a self-effacing diversion" (Barreca, *Snow* 109) is something Benna, the main character of *Anagrams,* knows first-hand. She confesses her confusion about puns meaning differently, and this strikes her when, at her husband's warning that "I never want to see you again," she believes him to say "I want to see again" (Moore, *Anagrams* 130). She tells him this, making a fool of herself in front of the man who is to leave.

Such a pathetic scene encompasses the hallmark features of Moore's humor: female self-deprecation usually takes place by means of metalinguistic word-play in humorous turns that keep the characters' intercommunication at bay. In fact, Moore's has been largely evaluated as an example of postmodernist prose fiction in its metafictional dynamics. This textual self-consciousness in her writing follows the postmodern fault lines whereby "[f]iction … invents worlds which have no existence divorced from the words in which they are constructed" (Scofield 221). Her first two published pieces comply with such a prose style: *Self-Help* tricks its readers by promising a conventional women's conduct guide, and actually comprising a short story collection in which second person women focalizers address the reader and tell experiences where mistakes abound and ways to get out of them are scarce. *Anagrams,* likewise, sits in the liminal boundary between short story cycle and fragmented novel. The book's divisions feature the same protagonists with their attributes exchanged in different chapters that encompass imaginary versions of the central character's life, thus challenging realistic mimesis. It is Moore who justifies the metafictional play as her pursuit to overcome "the limited choices … that people can't explore but in fiction perhaps you can explore them" (Kelly 6).

However, the metafictional game diminishes as one goes on reading her subsequent fiction. The short story collections *Like Life* (1990), *Birds of America* (1998) and *Bark* (2014), as well as her next novelistic production, *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* (1994) and *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), maintain the humorous manipulation of the possibilities offered by language but her early focus shifts on to a kind of writing more attuned with conventions of literary realism. Her prose shows some progression evolving from more unspecified settings to more politized storylines: *Like Life* features more stories specifically contextualized in American locations where social types share communal mores that are highly criticized; and her last shot story collection, *Bark,* and

her last novel, *A Gate at the Stairs,* reinforce such portrait by hinting at early 21st century political affairs through characters whose existence is tainted by political corruption. Kelly is right in arguing that, after Moore's narrative line evolves from her first works, her "commitment to capturing the texture of human life always predominates over any deconstructionist inclinations" (Kelly 5). Moore reasons why her writing has the citizens' souls widely, heartbreakingly canvassed: as "[a]lmost everything in our culture is lying to us," fiction "still remains as a means of delivering the truth" (Kelly 16).

At the same time, most of the early stories are focalized by women characters who interact in different ways with men, most of them appearing as abusive figures of patriarchal authority. A few examples from her first works set the tone for her early period: the unexperienced protagonist of "How to Be an Other Woman" tries to learn to be just one of the adulterer's several mistresses in *Self-Help*, while the protagonist of the later *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* faces the increasing distancing yet aggressive dominance of her husband. It is not until *Birds of America* that Moore includes more male characters that show themselves sympathetic towards the protagonist's emotional issues. Such a progression towards psychological explorations of male sensitivity goes hand in hand with the strand that configures her women characters: Raiffa explains that her female characters also go on escaping the veneer of victimization (385) and concludes that "Moore finally allows for the possibility of meaningful and lasting relationships for her women" (389).

There is, however, a feature maintained throughout her work when considering her women characters, and that is attuned to Moore's prose style. Chodat and Varvogli coincide in reading Moore's prose as a fast succession of images in a hectic language spoken by characters that seem to be performing each short scene on a stage. Chodat speaks about "breakneck" writing where "[t]he sentences hop and bounce, … in the way

that images skip around playfully on a TV screen" (48), and Varvogli discusses the short length of Moore's last novel as an "accumulation of small vignettes" (178). As a matter of fact, most of her female characters are in harmony not only with the way they enact their performances but also with their artistic sensibilities. Their physical relations with the others and their interests in singing, dancing, acting or story-telling provide key aspects for their characterization in terms of gender identity. In fact, Moore's is a fiction that presents a range of artistic individuals including poetry professors, dancers, actresses, librarians and an amalgam of singers who belong, or used to, in a chorus. All the characters' creative concerns are interlocked into their bodies, which they actually employ as a means of communication in the interaction with the other, which in some stories allows them to break out of the boundaries of accepted bodily behavior. By dispensing with the codes attached to traditional women's performance, some of her characters' bodies and tongues "call into question," as Butler writes, "the hegemonic force" (*Bodies* 2): in the open gaps between what is supposed to be enacted and what is actually performed, these women entertain their "female experience reclaiming, through movement and voice, possession of itself and its space" (Garner 214).

b. Dialectics and life narrativization in postmodern literature

If anything, Moore's fiction performs love. In his fascinating examination of love relationships, Roland Barthes puts forward the performative understanding of this emotion: when enacted, "to say I-love-you is … always true (has no other referent than its utterance: it is a performative)" (*Lover's* 148). Barthes begins his exploration of the lover's words in a prelude that extols the commitment to and need for love in the lonely postmodern era: "[t]his discourse is spoken, perhaps, by thousands of subjects (who knows?), but warranted by no one; it is completely forsaken by the surrounding

languages," a neglect that by the individual's own desertion has forced the speech of love to "become the site, however exiguous, of an affirmation" (2).

Where the voices of love intermingle to try corking this loneliness and finding their own affirmation is in the short story: Lorrie Moore warns us in her parsing of the American short story to be careful as "love can be deceiving" in the arena of a textual genre that "is about love … [a]nd yet it is not a love story" ("Introduction" xiv). In so doing, she pinpoints a literary tradition that traces back to the ancient Roman canon, especially Ovid's work: most importantly, *The Heroids* and *The Metamorphoses,* both detailing the sorrows suffered and transformations undergone by classical Greek heroes and heroines. Most of these are moved by their erotic awakenings, which often doom them to the destitute ending of their lives, in the well-known Greek myths—the ancient correlative of the modern tale. The protagonists' grief for love and their incomprehension seem to survive up until the postmodern literary era. There, it is Raymond Carver who proves the greatest figure of the expression of love through his portrayal of complex relationships between isolated individuals whose inability for self-articulation condemns them further apart in their lonely worlds, as the short stories show in his 1981 *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

Such enactment of affection among people informs Moore's own writing: she dramatizes the entanglements of the love felt and unfelt among her characters by leaving them in a latent background where memories and imaginings rise up and resurface in the characters' minds, stripping them naked. Naked—and still lonely: that Moore sums up the textual amalgam of a literary genre, the short story, that explores love and its misgivings as "a bouquet of beautiful, piercing, lonely voices" ("Introduction" 21) is symptomatic of the solitary undertone immanent to every lover's text. The diction of love seems to be that of loneliness: "[t]he lover's solitude … is a solitude of system: I am alone

in making a system out of it (perhaps because I am ceaselessly flung back on the solipsism of my discourse)" (Barthes, *Lover's* 212). This monologuing aspect of the loving self underlies the whole synergetic process in social relationships. Indeed, this emotional discourse exposes the need to overcome one's loneliness and plunge into mutual understanding between the self and the other. Solitude, then, constitutes both obstacle to and trigger of the engagement with an interlocutor: an operation that in itself describes the process encouraging writing. Certainly, in both love and language, the lonely self becomes another in its desire for a dialogue with a second person, be this real or invented; this is, "a creature still to come" (Barthes, *Lover's* 74)—or even a self-creation: "if the other does not come, I hallucinate the other" (39). In the words of love as in the accents of literature, our identity is built by an other speaking to us, confirming our self.

In dialogue with the interlocutor, moreover, that who listens will be later speaker and thus the forger of one's subjectivity by means of a reciprocal flowing of words that read each other's identity. Such an understanding of the creative process is at the center of the poetics of postmodernist critic Maurice Blanchot. He assigned the tasks of writer and reader the deadlocking characteristic of the artistic process, the affirmation of which takes place in a movement only originated in the solitude in which it is produced. Writing the work involves a transmigration of the writer's self into a no-one inhabiting the real world, effacing the author's identity, and it is only when the work turns into a dyadic matter between the one and the other that the ongoing process can take its own course (Blanchot 37). When he describes the reader's enterprise as a "dialogue with the work consist[ing] increasingly in "raising" it to truth, in transforming it into ordinary language" (230), he in fact registers how the reader leaves behind the passive role she has been traditionally assigned in any processual analysis, holding sway in it in the same way that any speaker takes responsibility for the development of the interaction with the other.

What is more, Blanchot places the interlocutor, the reader, in the limelight of the whole artistic creation, as he confers her the essential part in the interpretative practice: as he claims, "to read is … to allow the book to *be*: written–this time all by itself, without the intermediary of the writer" (193). This standpoint dissolves the writer's relevance, anticipating Barthes's essay on the author's death some years later. In "The Death of the Author," Barthes certainly eschews the author as the source of original meaning and professes that now "we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (*Image* 148). Giving up one's own subjectivity as the cornerstone of narrative construction, Blanchot and Barthes center on the listener and reader, who actually ""make[s]" the work communicate itself" (Blanchot 198) by becoming an agent that understands its meaning and turns the product into a full entity. The work in the shape of a book, thus, parallels the work resulting from the dialogue between the one and the other, the distance between both abolished by the active feedback in their reader-speaker roles.

The literal meaning of the reader's status is theorized by the critic of consciousness Georges Poulet. As part of the Geneva school, Poulet focused on the phenomenological study of literature, which analyzed how the text and language need to be apprehended by the reader's consciousness in order to have a meaning, paving the way for the modern tradition of hermeneutics. Poulet's philosophy, however, engages with literature as the author's mode of experience and awareness—the status of the writer which Blanchot and Barthes take issue with. He detailed his own phenomenological theory by considering the book a "sort of human being" that is constructed in the reader's self after the interpretative action (Poulet 59). In so doing, however, he delineates the dialectic exchange in which oneself and the other engage, thereby agreeing with his contemporaries on declaring the other's role as necessary for one's identity to be developed in the interaction. Theorizing

on the reflection of such interpersonal relation in the narrative storyline, Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero puts forward a formulation of the developing self which sheds more light in her predecessors' direction. She defines identity as intrinsically narratable, a continuum of life-stories that are always "entrusted … to the tale of another," thus concluding that "the identity of the self, crystallized in the story, is totally constituted by the relations of her appearance to others in the world" (36). The self's exhibitive and relational qualities, then, allow for the creation of a unique, distinctive personal identity.

What is of special interest in Poulet's theory is his remark about the process whereby the writer becomes a subject in the other's consciousness through her reading of the writer's actions and words. Thusly, the interlocutor is suffused with our verbal and bodily engagement and her self gets modified by our ongoing updated identity in the reciprocal dialectic interaction between the two subjectivities (Poulet 56). Ultimately, in the same way that the reader's mind is pervaded by the voice of the writer's words, the identity of our interlocutor in the interpersonal dialogue suffuses our own self, where it is formed. It is hardly necessary to refer to social theorist Herbert Mead's exploration of the intersubjective relationships established between the self and the members of the community to underline how the individual in itself is an object that only acquires self-consciousness when it interacts with the other (Nielsen xiv). The need for the interlocutor to overcome one's solipsism is also pictured in Poulet's act of reading the consciousness of the author, who in the process acquires her subjectivity. By proving how the mental images formed in the reader's mind, "in order to exist, need the shelter which I provide" (Poulet 55), he points at the other's need for the writer/speaker to construct itself.

In the nature of such an exchange is inherent the reflexive grounds of intersubjectivity: we come to understand ourselves as agents by recognizing, constructing and modifying the self we become in the ongoing response to the other's interplay with

us, which serves us the functions of a mirror. At the same time, self-perception through the other's mirroring is crucial in phenomenological exchange: "in the perfect identification of two consciousnesses, each sees itself reflected in the other" (Poulet 60). Moreover, the intersubjective comprehension can only occur when individuals use language in a performative context by enacting behaviors responding to the other in the very social act. For Cavarero, the self's uniqueness and narratability depend on the character's performance in the political space with the other: "who each one is, is revealed to others when he or she acts in their presence in an interactive theater where each is, at the same time, actor and spectator" (22). The physical context where the characters engage in exchange with one another, then, determines the production of their text—what they talk or write about.

And yet the text's content will not be restricted to the context. Certainly, what do the interlocutors talk about? Through their role-switching, they produce the conversation that reveals their attempts to construct one's life narrative and, on the way, one's identity. In fact, breaking the boundaries of one's existential isolation through the engagement with the other embodies nothing but one effect of the self's inner cravings: mainly, the human ability to narrate and, by the way, transform life choices. This explains Roland Barthes' prevalence of the text as the shape of one's life: it is what is said and not who says it that prevails in the linguistic interplay. He comments that "to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality … to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'" (*Image* 143), adding later that "life can only imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, a lost, infinitely remote imitation" (147). In this view, one's life is but a series of narratives produced in the interaction between two selves, the resulting text an unstable product that infinitely constructs and transforms our identities. In Cavarero's theory, the self and her life story prove insubstantial due to the multiplicity

of experiences she goes through and the misleading memory she has of them. She needs the other's narrative account of her own life to satisfy her desire for narratability, governed by unity: as she observes, because "[t]he narratable self only constitutes itself fully through the tale of its story" (Cavarero 137), then "everyone looks for that unity of their own identity in the story" (41). Similarly, when Barthes concludes that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (*Image* 148), he emphasizes the fact that the text can only be developed and completed by the other's part in the dialogue, which features the ongoing reconstruction of our identity.

The other and the self, then, constitute a repository of previous readings. Accordingly, Mead gives utterance to the idea that "[t]he epistemic "I" knows herself as subject from the memory she has of herself and from what she sees in the other's gaze" (Nielsen 53): the self only acquires knowledge of itself by remembering the past interactions with the other. And yet, there is in the dialectic process an urge even prior to engaging with our interlocutor: the desire to create an amalgam of stories born out of our selective choosing of memories; a process that, in the rearrangements demanded by a narrative intended to be told to the others, offers but memories half-remembered and even made up—fictions. Our storytelling indeed narrativizes a half-invented life which we tell the other, our identity construction lying in a pendulation between the half-memory we tell the other and the formation continued through the other's feedback. In this context it is significant Blanchot's reflection on the liberating functions of memory as a lifesaving boat that tidies the debris of the past: "[i]t frees me by giving me the means of calling freely upon the past, of ordering it according to my present intention" (30). In such a re-collection, forgetting constitutes one of the elements that open the door to artistic creativity: "[m]emories are necessary, but only that they may be forgotten: in order that in this forgetfulness … there might at last be born a word" (Blanchot 87). What is more,

forgetting reveals no other than the gap where something that was before is no longer. Therefore, what else is forgetting than the evocation of an image, the trigger of imagination? A void that gets refilled with fiction, which does but transcribe the individual's efforts to remember what was said and performed in the past—with the subsequent failures in the shape of forgetfulness and invention. Thus, both the interlocutor and the past gear the narrative of one's identity in the act of telling a life story.

i. Dialogue and life narrativity in Lorrie Moore's fiction

> I had also learned that in literature—perhaps as in life—one had to speak not of what the author intended but of what a story intended for itself. The creator was inconvenient—God was dead. But the creation itself had a personality and hopes and its own desires and plans and little winks and dance steps and collaged intent. (Moore, *A Gate At the Stairs* 264)

It is Lorrie Moore herself who argues for the first-person voice in the writing of criticism, as this "appreciates the intersection of one individual reader's life with the thing that has been read" and thus "reveals criticism to be a form of autobiography" (*See What* xviii). It is not strange, therefore, that her literary assessments of works by Alice Munro or Margaret Atwood among others recurrently offer comments on their explorations of love or the individual's contradictions, the relevance of art or their portrayal of women's everyday lives. Nor is it altogether surprising to find the same concerns in her fiction. Suffice it to say, she even parallels the workings of writing with those of love in that both act paradoxically: they "remove one both painfully and deliciously from the ordinary shape of existence" (*See What* 59). Such a statement becomes enlightening for a literary production that scrutinizes the contradictory ways Americans desire, hurt and survive their own blows in a socially-minded national landscape. While Moore's is the plot that admirably captures partners, friends, parents, offspring or the self seeing their love for

others or for themselves fading to death, it is actually in contradiction where her women characters grapple with the loss of strong familial bonds. Mostly a covert conflict concealed by their jokes, these characters indeed embrace an inner life composed of a deeply witty imagination and a profound sense of pain, emotional contrasts that prove "the very thing that keeps sanity in place" (Moore, *See What* 201).

In coming to sane terms with a contradicted self, not only Moore's women but their engagements with other women are paragons. Cixous's poetics of feminine language, body and interaction among women speaks volumes to these exchanges. She understands woman in her relation with the contradicting yet satisfying network she creates, where the spreading of love is given by her and received by other women: as she argues, "[t]here always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other—in particular, the other woman" (Cixous 881). This reciprocal sharing of female experiences allows woman "to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was "born"" (Cixous 881). Moreover, Cixous posits writing as woman's self-discovering act, which leads to the engagement with a female interlocutor with whom she identifies: as she espouses, "[w]hen I write, … everything we will be calls us to the … unappeasable search for love," concluding that "[i]n one another we will never be lacking" (893). Considering the narrative qualities of such interplay, the interchanging identity of woman in union with other women creates the accurate space for her narratable self, as Cavarero assays, to pass "on to the self-narration, up to the point at which the other woman is familiar enough with the story to be able to tell it herself" (63).

In this context, women's interplay encompasses a unique type of interpersonal communication that second-wave feminist critics have thoroughly explored in their attempts to raise a politics of female consciousness which, by positing interdependency between women and the renegotiation of difference in life experience, aims for the

entitled enjoying of a self-identified woman existence. In "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Audre Lorde advocates the need to voice women's true expression by promoting sorority as the source of effective caring between women—"for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed" (*Sister* 41). The self's capability for life narrativization finds its cornerstone in women's storytelling: by articulating her experiences in the presence of the plural female other, her narration promotes a mutual interplay that creates an exclusively female identity. As Cavarero notes, while "there is a privileging of the word as the vehicle of a desire for identity that only the narrated form seems able to render tangible," women in particular "generate a political space that finally exposes them" (59).

In the background of these exchanges, the cultural and political state engendered responds to what Rich pinpoints when she calls for the understanding of women's lives as that of a lesbian continuum, which designates an overarching woman-identified existence that includes "the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support" (Rich, "Compulsory" 648-649). Thus, real female identity is tackled, not in opposition to values assigned to a male counterpart, but as cardinal existence in itself, where her mind is revealed original in the expression of her life experience with another woman. This type of female bonding, however, does not preclude ideological distance among women's standpoints; quite the opposite, it supports the distinctive qualities to each female experience: as Rich argues, "*[t]heories of female power and female ascendancy must reckon fully with the ambiguities of our being, and with the continuum of our consciousness"* (*Born* XXXV).

Female connections are no doubt dramatized in Moore's fiction in interesting ways that stage a common bond among her women characters: under their protective shield of

slapstick, they are most of the time, as Kelly writes, "spiritually destitute: abandoned, cheated, aching for kindness" (9). Moore's first novel actually sets the tone for this strand of her literary portrayal, where women's attempt to reconcile their inner lives with their external world turns out winding: the multifarious Benna confronts an abortion, the death of her husband, her failure at an unsatisfying teaching position and, underlying her conflicts, her inability to affectively engage in intimacy with the others. In this desolate context, she resorts to make-believe to conjure up an imaginary domestic atmosphere where a fantastic daughter, Georgianne, provides her with a language and feelings of affection that she can emotionally benefit from. Such plot intimates how it is when words grow wings and soar over the emotional and material poverty of everyday life in late 20th century America that love can be fostered in her work. In *Anagrams,* the source of the protagonist's most sincere feeling of joy and relief from reality's failures is her status as a mother, and some of Moore's next short stories also recreate female protagonists as mothers who either have brought up their daughters or are still on the way—to name a few, "Places to Look for Your Mind," from *Like Life,* or "Thanks For Having Me," from *Bark*. In these cases, the daughters constitute characters in the flesh whose increasingly distanced relationships with their mothers pervade the protagonists' ruminating thoughts and have a devastating impact on their consciousness when they try to establish a bond of care and love with them. In their attempt, their minds become growingly inhabited by the interactions they either have with their daughters in the present time or the memories of such engagements—held in the characters' past, echoing today.

Also evoking a longing past or picturing a felt present, the storylines of other Moore's short narratives are centered on the same bond from the reversed standpoint: having the daughters in the limelight of focalization. This is the case of the protagonists of "What is Seized," in *Self-Help*, or "Which is More that I Can Say About Some People,"

from *Birds of America.* The first story is part of Moore's parodic rewriting of self-improving guides and features the second-person narrative of a daughter coming to terms with the remembrance of her dead mother in the form of pictures, diaries and memories of uttered words permeating her mind. The later story presents the trip that a daughter and her mother take together and the readjustments in identity formation that the daughter undergoes by sharing this experience with her. Such journey prompts her reflection on the way in which her younger self has constructed itself against the backdrop of maternal (un)attention. In both stories, thus, the daughters' haven under their mothers' treatment grows highly conflicted in the ruminations on their former and current tie with them.

In this line, the clashes between the past and the present in the shape of the female characters' desire to encapsulate the happy moments of lost times are featured in the personal narratives of Moore's mother and daughter characters. They become narrators and co-writers of their own life stories in a way that, as Cavarero explains, "follows an everyday practice where the tale is existence, relation and attention" (54). They resort to memory and imagination to engage with female speakers of the past or the present, real or conjured-up, thereby trying to find some relief from their sheer desolation. Using Cavarero's words on life narrativization, each of these "is attempting to fit her having been that which she is into the lifestory that has been interlaced with others' stories" (37). Even those characters who still have an interlocutor side by side carry out self-explorations driven by the conflict between what their counterparts are and what they were: it is then when they plunge into their inner remembrance and redefine the terms in which such interplay has built their own sense of self. The female characters' search for the lost and longed-for dialogue with their counterparts, then, is either conjured up and dreamed about—in the cases where make-believe amounts to the creation of the counteracting voice—or remembered; this is, half-remembered, half-imagined. The

other's word thus becomes her only living thing—"with its own little winks and dance steps and collaged intent" (Moore, *Gate* 264), as *A Gate At The Stairs*'s Tassie says in the preface to this section— by dint of the women protagonists' reading and re-membering of it. That which is voiced detaches from its author and becomes alive when interpreted by a reader—in this case, by Moore's women protagonists.

But, by reading what the other says, the protagonists try to break out of the boundaries of their complete isolation while tackling what Moore's narratives partly focus on: the attempt for a meaningful narrativization of their life stories. Their need for the other stays in proportion with their ongoing process of identity construction and meaning formation: it unveils aspects of the relation between their outer world and their inner self that boost personal growth. On pinpointing the reasons behind the innovative nature of her novel, Moore stated that "*Anagrams* became an exercise in bringing something into being, even bringing something impossibly into being" (qtd. in Weekes, "Speech" 563). That something, which runs nervously in the background to many of her narratives, may be the subject of a pivotal part of her fiction: her lonely mothers and daughters' anxious longing for a dialogue with whom they most need.

Accordingly, when commenting on the composite novel shaping *Anagrams,* which balances "unity and multiplicity, continuity and discontinuity," Kelly rejects feminist approaches to it because the novel in her view underlines in a general way "the individual's sense of multiple possibilities and potentialities" (47). While her criticism holds true especially for Moore's later work, where psychological explorations of male characters abound, there also should be claim that Moore's storytelling maintains interest throughout in unique experiences of women's identity formation, specifically when it shares space with the traditional roles that late 20th century and early 21st century America assigns to women. Indeed, greater insight into Moore's recreation of American life in the

flesh of its female members and their struggles for self-realization is provided by the analysis of the fictional pieces featuring this conflicted kind of love bond between mothers and daughters.

In this line, Kelly's comments about the mother-daughter relationship canvassed in Moore's work may be rightful: she suggests about the short story collection *Self-Help* that, as "almost all the stories engage with or touch on the complex bonds between parents and children, it seems appropriate to analyze these stories from a less gendered perspective, reflecting on their power of exploring … "troubled relationships" in general" (Kelly 43). And yet, it is when closely examining Moore's fiction and paying due relevance to the particular emphasis on the mother-daughter bond present in her work that this parental exploration asks to be assessed in certainly more gendered terms, since it discerns, as will be seen, insightful views on the author's criticism of policies on gender-role socialization. Following psychoanalytic critic Nancy Chodorow's thoughts on the mother's sense of continuity with her children, Moore's narratives specifically show that "this sense is stronger, and lasts longer, vis-à-vis daughters" and achieve to both determine and question the idea that "identification and symbiosis with daughters is more likely … to be based on experiencing a daughter as an extension or double of a mother herself" (*Reproduction* 109). The study of Moore's earlier mother and daughter characters with their latest counterparts is adamant in this respect: it is their filial ties, sustained on self-identification, that design their life narrativity and identity reconstruction.

III. Analysis

a. Motherhood: *Anagrams* and "Thank You for Having Me"

Then take me disappearin' through the smoke rings of my mind
Down the foggy ruins of time, far past the frozen leaves
The haunted, frightened trees, out to the windy beach
Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow.
(Bob Dylan, "Mr. Tambourine Man")

Anagrams (1987) is Lorrie Moore's first published novel; "Thank You for Having Me" is the last piece included in her last short story collection, *Bark* (2014), and, in spite of the time lapse between both works of fiction, Moore's narrative interest in picturing the various experiences of women mothers with their daughters does not seem to vanish with time. Rather, it rearranges itself by experimenting with story layers of make-believe around the protagonists and the attributes of their counterparts, their daughters, who prove both sources of love and fright. Where the protagonists of the novel and short story concur is at their moments of crisis, which amount to renewing turning points in their lives: the narratives trace their journey towards emotional juncture after surges of depression. In her last life rearrangement, portrayed in the chapter "The Nun of That," Benna introduces herself and her mothering identity by alluding to the opening crack that is breaking a wall in her house, a Poesque metaphor that anticipates her devastating personal disintegration once her home is ripped up. Similarly, the first image of the female main character in the short story contrasts her talked-about passion for pop music with her dark present, where she holds a memorial for Michael Jackson; that the protagonist remains unnamed and without an identity except for that of mother is the primary token of her personal struggle.

What Benna cannot anagrammatically change as part of her characterization throughout the novel is her vulnerability. Moreover, her poor self-image goes on an equal

footing with the working positions she is at: the chapters trace her journey from pole dancer to poetry professor, and she drags a life of economic poverty continuing from a working-class childhood where traumas about her family seem to enforce a deterministic girdle around her present. It is in the last episode, "The Nun of That," where the tensions from the previous chapters reach the narrative climax through her identity conflicts and the desire for children that has been increasing throughout the chapters finally materializes in her invention of her daughter Georgianne. It is actually in this life arrangement where Benna's identity is configured as a liminal character: her mind and body sit in the space between the real and imaginary. Her stay at this in-between space encompasses the first location of her identity crisis: that between her outer existence, as experienced through her teaching position and the relationships with the others, and her inner re-creation of the real world, where Georgianne provides the only source of love. Although it is herself that tells her story, the narration detaches to the third voice when at her teaching position: such a turn goes hand in hand with the emotionally hermetic, self-deprecating quality of the face she shows to the outer world, and gives utterance to the self-alienating feelings this job enforces her into.

Of course, George is nothing but Benna's projection of her utmost mothering desires and her memories of herself as a child. While imagination and memory intersect at interesting levels, there are indeed crucial moments where the story renders George's existence, although full-fledged in Benna's narration, actually unable for effective communication with a real interlocutor, thereby reflecting her own personal ordeal. When they go shopping (73), George also shows a conflicted outlook between voicelessness in the interaction with the real other, and her flippant, ironic, intelligent engagements with Benna. When she decides to take the infantile dress printed with babies, she acts according to a too childish trait, which responds not only to Benna's emotional instability

but also to her desire for a needy individual dependent on her care: as Adrienne Rich suggests, "the 'motherless' woman … is giving to others what she herself has lacked; but this will always mean that she needs the neediness of others in order to go on feeling her own strength" (*Born* 243). Referring on several occasions to her mother's demanding hardness on her, Benna in fact resorts to the invention of a childish daughter to escape her anxiety out of a traumatic early childhood and later marriage.

In her search for love, not only George but also her new real lover and student Darrel is paramount: at her birthday party, it is Darrel's physical shelter that fosters Benna's self-estrangement—as she thinks, "I feel bashful and hide my face in Darrel's sleeve as if I were Georgianne" (177). And although the breakup with him plunges her into the icy ocean of the outer reality, Benna admits that her demanding expectations on Darrel are nothing but a further disguising strategy that protects her vulnerability and need for connection with the other: as she intimates, "The function of disguise is to convince the world you're not there, or that if you are, you should not be eaten. You camouflage yourself as imperious teacher, as imperious lover, as imperious bitch, simply to hang out and survive" (194). This is, by means of pretense she conceals the feelings she finds herself unable to get across, which comprises the misleading basis for her relationships with real interlocutors and her own rearranging of her identities throughout *Anagrams*.

For one thing, the use of disguise as a protecting device and Benna's self-estranging feelings are also present in the daily life of the short story's mother protagonist. For the other, the main character's interactions with her daughter are of a very different order. Worried about the dress she will wear tomorrow, the unnamed narrator in "Thank You for Having Me" reveals her own misgivings about her old age, which she seems so adamant in concealing. By intimating that "the person who needed to be careful what she wore was me" (Moore, "Thank" 178), she not only introduces the harming chasm with

her daughter Nickie but also puts the emphasis on the metaphorical renderings of disguise. Balancing these is the story's play on mirroring characters: Maria, Nickie's former nanny, is getting married on a wedding where she has her ex-husband Ian as musician and best man. In it, he has established with Maria a contradictory dialogue: the shirt he is wearing, printed with the entitling phrase "Thank You for Having Me," conveys some personal growth from the end of his romantic relationship with Maria, which at the same time is rendered fake by the sorrowful music he is singing. The garments he wears thus become self-humiliating in the same way that the unnamed mother's leopard dress is mocked by her daughter. And, in the same fashion that Benna had compared herself to certain species, which "in order not to be eaten, will take on the characteristics of something that is an unpleasant meal" (Moore, *Anagrams* 194), the unnamed mother admits admiring "camouflage," like the leopard blending in its habitat (Moore, "Thank" 179). This unavoidably shows the character's desire for a self-protecting strategy that may conceal her increasing suffering for the uncommunicable relationship with her teenaged daughter.

What is more, the disguising image reaches out to Nickie's character: in order to reason her daughter's identity, the mother delineates her personality by remembering how she used to trick-or-treat people, moving from one place to another and waiting for the potential "customers" (Moore, "Thank" 182) at Halloween. Moreover, she tellingly evokes Nickie's usual costumes: not only that of bride but also what Nickie described as a "tree nip," the biting quality to it suggesting a sort of gnawing vampire (182). Besides, the narrator's image of her adolescent daughter is that of an expansive individual: "Now tall and long-limbed and inscrutable, she seemed more than ever like a sniper. I felt paralyzed beside her" (193). Nickie's portrait is actually drawn on the model of someone who disguises both to benefit from and have control over the others. What is more, the short story's mirror game reinforces such picture as it toys with Nickie's reflection on the

marrying Maria: when the mother thinks of Maria's previous marriages, she envisions her like "a narrative girl" in different stories that "had to be spellbinding or she lost interest in the main character" (184). As her mirroring personality, Nickie is viewed by her mother as a character that changes from one story to the next, epitomizing her ability or, better, her will to change her features and move on to a person outside the familiar insides.

The protagonist's outline of Nickie and her own depressing self-portrait are explained at a climactic moment in which she reflects on her lifetime situation as a mother. By emphasizing the metaphorical understanding of their mother-daughter bond as engendered in the kernel of pure chance and fate—as she says, their dialogue is established "with a streak of dog-walkers-meeting-at-the-park" (181)—, the conversation with Nickie reveals the underlying source of the narrator's anxieties: her husband's abandonment and its effects on her status as a single mother. When she espouses that "[m]others and their only children of divorce were a skewed family dynamic, if they were families at all" (181), she considers the only token through which she is identified in the short story, that of a mother, as hardly real and mostly fake, unable to reach the conventions of a mother-daughter bond within traditional parental codes. Without the father figure, their conversation is "unrecognizable as filial or parental" (181), a statement that reveals her lack of authoritativeness over her daughter's humiliating treatment, and that voices a shape of former dependency on her husband that recalls Benna's exchanges with her male others and the latter's disengagement.

Similar to the unnamed mother's experience of emotional destitution caused by her husband's abandonment, Benna's story also envisions moments that symbolize the growth of self-hatred in her, such as the beginning of her marriage and the fights with her husband all along. She indeed reflects on her younger self as follows:

> People didn't get married because they had *found* someone … It was more like musical chairs: Wherever you were when the music of being single stopped, that's where you sat. I was twenty-six when the notes winding down and going minor. A dark loneliness … scuffed in instead. Or maybe I was just tired of saying I was twenty-six years old and having it sound like "I am a transsexual." (Moore, *Anagrams* 74)

These words are echoed in the unnamed narrator's arbitrary, pathetic reason for marrying despite her husband's carelessness: "Still, I preferred the whole thing to being a lonely old spinster, the fate I once thought I was most genetically destined for" (Moore, "Thank" 181). No doubt, these characters randomly resort to their marriage as the only escape from a state of female singleness that, far from conceived as an exercise of autonomous woman-identified existence, carries stigma and sense of failure to their intellectual lives, which implies the woman's status as derivative in relation to man's way of life. Adrienne Rich argues the reasoning behind the workings of compulsory marriage when she intimates that "[a] woman seeking to escape … economic disadvantage may well turn to marriage as a form of hoped-for-protection, while bringing into marriage neither social nor economic power" ("Compulsory" 642). Benna and Nickie's mother do resent staying under the ideologies of patriarchal codes, whose bewildering effects they try to resist through their mordant remarks about their harrowing experiences within marriage. In fact, Benna remembers marriage as an institution where the remnants of premarital life are vanished by gender expectations: as she claims, "By the end of our marriage I was sitting in our house in outer suburbia, wondering, Where does love go?" (Moore, *Anagrams* 75).

Male negligence in her marriage paves the way for the other men's misunderstanding of Benna's inner world. Although very endearing for her, Benna's friendship with Gerard is nevertheless sustained on sexual power relations and pervaded by the toxicity of his patriarchal value judgments. When he accuses her of promiscuity

with her college students (Moore, *Anagrams* 102)—thereby questioning her ethics on sexual behavior and foisting ideological restrictions on pleasure upon her body—he welcomes the ambivalent quality of his engagement with Benna, based on sexual attraction, love and jealousy. Similarly, Benna relates the stanzas of one of Darrel's poems with her bathroom set, where once a fly dragged a spider on its web through the air (140): in so doing, she pictures her partner's role penetrating Benna's identity and home and forcing her to follow his trail, an image that once again devises a type of exchange with the real other based on dependency and self-humiliation.

In this context, it is Benna herself who determines the gender-based origin of her crisis and identity fracture: after discovering his unrequited love, Darrel confesses a kind of "numbness" (151) and Benna wonders "Why is Darrel numb? Why is Gerard drinking? What is the essential difference between men and women?—somehow I feel the answer to the first two, to almost all problems, lies there in the last" (153). Such a devising drives her to the suggestion that the answer to "almost all problems," represented by Darrel's use of language and Gerard's drinking as the channels of their strains, do lie in the male-dominating system where men can opt for articulation of their feelings and be understood. Women, however, cannot hope for the same: they are shown to be immersed in an apparent normal life, this is, in the silencing of self-expression. It is Benna's crucial answer to Darrel's complaints after the warning of his abandonment that for the first time voices such emotional lack, resulting from the concealment of her feelings. As she tells him, "Don't think I couldn't be numb too if I didn't work so damn hard not to be" (151). Her conflicts are thus shown to be rooted in her sexual identity, which cannot provide her with confidence in the female gender, rendered alienated in an all-male context.

On a similar track, the onset of the unnamed mother in the short story clearly suggests the portrait of a woman in an ongoing juncture: her state oozes stagnation and

vacuity, which cues the unnamed status of her first-person narration and the erasure of her self, evolving from experiences of musical joy to a deadly present only defined in terms of imposed motherhood. Nickie's designation of this character as her mother paves the way for the later inimical relationship between the two, a mother-daughter bond that furthers the protagonist's conflict as gender-specific. Indeed, her fancy for camouflage, emphasized by her leopard spotted dress—which shows itself as "a standoff between predator and prey" (Moore, "Thank" 179)—portrays her too real daughter as her hostile other, with whom she is "in fear—as in fearful of my life" (179): awed by her daughter's alienating manners, she retreats into the alarming self-exile represented by her garment.

Both this woman's mother condition and Benna's fantasizing cravings for mothering specifically encompass examples of the heterosexual imperative that determines womanhood in sole terms of motherhood, which Rich criticizes: "Throughout recorded history the 'childless' woman has been regarded … as a failed woman, unable to speak for the rest of her sex" (*Born* 251). Understanding the mother's relationship with her daughter as some respite from engulfing loneliness is one of Chodorow's foundations of her studies of mother-daughter bonds: commenting on Chodorow's idea, Raymond concludes that "[i]n order to have deep affection, women seek emotional sustenance with children and are thus oriented toward family and mothering" (Raymond 43). Raymond, however, argues that "the major problem is that mainly women become the visible and immediate conduits of hetero-reality while deriving the least benefits from such a system" (45). Consequently, the more immersed the mother is in the patriarchal concept of family, the more depressed she will prove in her functions of mothering. Surely, the unnamed narrator proves her conflicted maternity to be at the kernel of her female identity crisis. Both Nickie's abuses of her failed attempt at cooking the chickens for the wedding (Moore, "Thank" 187), as well as her rejection of her mother from the repository of her

past—of which she can only remember her nanny Maria speaking Portuguese (189)—are followed by the mother's acknowledgement of her critique. As a result, Rich's claim that "motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children" due to the restricted power of mothers' care in patriarchy (*Born* 223) speaks volumes to this mother's self-destructing outlook: what she thinks of a defective family renders her personality further marginalized and, similar to Benna, with no real shelter of her own.

In turn, their narratives show how the origin of their gender-based cruxes is ingrained in and articulated through their language use and their particular insights into the communicative functions of language. While Benna uses infantile motherese to admit projecting an everlasting image of George, which in her old age "will be the same flannelled muffin as now" (Moore, *Anagrams* 105), she however boycotts her own in-class lecture on the metaphorical functions of language: as she muses, "What rot, she thought. What could be more articulate than a blade of grass, a lovely grass scaled by an ant, what could be more superfluous than words, ghoulish and life-eating" (105). What she thinks to herself voices her own frustration for George's imaginary nature and for her invented daughter's (and thus her own) inability for connection with the other's understanding. As a result, although she feels George as a separate entity, the contradiction inherent in her existence and the canvass of a language where female experience cannot be portrayed drive Benna to reject language as a means of communication. Instead, she employs wordplay and images like George herself to relieve her impossibility to communicate her misery with her male other, who is always suffused with sexist ideology. Thus, Benna's female condition makes language useless and images expressive: assuming words as "life-eaters," her identity as a woman needs to resort to the silent images that nevertheless speak for themselves, such as Georgianne.

Her inability to operate on the linguistic workings of the real, outer world lies on the same process whereby she fathoms her own identity; this is, anagrammatically. Her realization that the meaning changes when an anagrammatic process takes place (129-130) explains her lifetime misunderstanding of the relationships surrounding her and her retreat into the make-believe sphere, where she can play on words, master and use her own voice with no risk of the others' confusion. The outcome of such perception results in Benna's outlook on language as a human construct that cannot be trusted, an institution which, like love, adulthood, motherhood or art, is written in unintelligible hieroglyphics, a male-dominated foreign language (133). The dehumanized ways of these institutions, so alienating for Benna's identity, are appropriated by her imaginings, adapting them to her own understanding and thus making them more approachable. Indeed, far from resigning to the oppressive patriarchal force of her society, which renders her attempts at communication mishandled, Benna rebels against it by making a particular use of language able to create a humane, fantastic world where her desires and misgivings can be given attention to. In fact, the arbitrary dynamics of language—it can get across nothing but the opposite of what she envisions and means, resulting in erroneous interplays of love—allow her to glimpse the specific purposes of words, understood in such a way as to provide one with a sense of pleasure: "words are all you need for love—you say them and then just for the hell of it your heart rises and spills over into them" (148). Even though grounded in instable misleading, words create an unreal yet relieving dimension to her existence, like George, who encourages her to keep on facing the world.

However, as the crippling effects of her conflicted relationships with the real others emphasize Benna's awareness of her loneliness and increase her identity crack, George's interactions with her grow sicker and more distanced. At her solitary dinner for Thanksgivings, Benna thinks of George as "a killer" (174), which correlates with the fear

of the short story's unnamed mother for her daughter Nickie, imagined as a sniper (Moore, "Thank" 183). Both metaphorical suggestions picture the daughters as destroyers of both the love outside their reach and the love felt for their mothers, which in Benna's case implies the destruction of her own self-esteem. In a childish tantrum, George escapes and drives to the edge of the property (Moore, *Anagrams* 174); her will to get out pictures the way Benna increasingly loses control of her inner world and this part of her identity, underlyingly implying her self-thwarting attempts at surviving amidst approaching helplessness. It is certainly at the times when George's maturation process becomes evident that Benna reaches out peaks of utmost depression and paranoid: for instance, she plunges into pervading silence when she gets her birthday present from Georgianne (175), which is the same as last year's, a repetition that symbolizes George's inability to construct new shapes of love and, thus, Benna's own to renew forms of self-esteem.

After her confession of her imaginary daughter's existence to Gerard, Benna's final scene with George stages how she definitely lets her go: when she prevents George from holding her breath and dying, her suggestion embodies the attempt to spare her daughter the burden of adult isolation and voicelessness in which Benna has been and is still sunk (203). This action reveals her effort, through the imagined figure of Georgie, to redressing the past mistakes that have led her to her current state of loneliness. Forsaken by her most rapturous yet evanescent self—as she thinks to herself, "All life seems to me a strange dream about losing things you never had to begin with" (206)—, Benna then makes her final attempt for communication with the real other by resigning to the arbitrary functions of language. Her self-expression seems temporarily successful in taking care of Gerard at hospital, as she falls prey to the deceitful tricks of language: for instance, while she tells him that "[y]ou're not going to die," she thinks that "something, it's true, is wrong" (209). And, after he dies, her stay at the false surface of language and her

miserable visit to his brother make her undergo a process of realization that her old assumption on the need for the other's everlasting dependence on her care is actually "distancing and finally dehumanizing" (217). However, not only the mutually emotional distancing with his brother but also his sexual advances to her increase her self-alienation, prompting further concealment by embodying another alternative identity (222). It is at this crux when Benna loses all her residual trust in human respect, love and life.

This, however, she uses to get a toehold in a new yet already well-known phase of her identity transformation: it is now when she fosters the same operations of language that had failed her interactions with the real others. The last part of the chapter features George's return and her infantile talk, jokes, humor, all of which represent the way Benna understands language: fictions that misnarrate life yet endow her female self with pleasure and joy in a woman-identified experience where her fantastic word, far from hitting the harsh surface of transaction with the real other, engages in profuse dialogue with its make-believe interlocutor. Indeed, not only is gender-based her identity crisis but also her, however partial, recovery: her happy interactions with George make her think they are "why *a woman* makes things up: Because when she dies, those lives she never got to are all going down with her" (225, my emphasis). In her thoughts, it is herself who views self-exile from real life and the fictional re-constructions of oneself and the others as the only means for a woman to enjoy hope and happiness, feelings that will only be achieved through the reflecting interplay with imagined female others that enable communication and outspoken self-expression. Although what Benna performs entails a complete estrangement from the realm of reality, it shows how nothing but imagination relieves women's death in life. In this line, this is a hopeful ending for Benna's ongoing process of identity reconstruction, sustained and contrasted by George's dialogue.

Although the unnamed mother in the short story is not childless as Benna in real life is, the self-assigned fake status to her imposed motherhood within a familiar nucleus in which she has no faith renders her psychologically bereft of daughter. What is more, the conflicting nature of their interplay originates in the same suffocating society that misunderstands Benna's struggles. The unnamed mother, however, cannot find shelter in her daughter because the real experience of her relationship with her fills the void represented by childlessness and the reality of it shatters any mothering idealism, contextualized within her inability to hold effective communication with her daughter. As she says, because "[s]o much urgent and lifelike love went rumbling around underground and died there, never got expressed at all," the mother encourages "some errant inconvenient attraction [to] have its way" (Moore, "Thank" 180), which conveys her regret for the unexpressed love for the other, in her case, for her family and for Nickie.

The narrator in fact pronounces a discursive statement on maternity after seeing what they take to be the bewildered attitude of Ian's father once Maria has abandoned Ian: "The older generation," I said, shaking my head, as if it didn't include me. "They can't take any change. There's too much missingness that has already accumulated" (185). By reasoning thus, the unnamed mother seems to be projecting not only her own missing out of former, more loving interactions with her family but also her failure to foster more in her insides, a process that continues in the present over Nickie's growth into adulthood. In this way, the unnamed mother aligns with Benna in her consistent attempts at redressing what went wrong. Certainly, Benna explicitly states the source of her ordeal in a regretting first voice that speaks to the unnamed mother's conflicted mind: "I don't move on well. I don't trick-or-treat well" (Moore, *Anagrams* 145). As she admits her shortcomings in operating on the outer world's mechanisms of benefitting from the other, she sketches a trick-or-treating landscape that the unnamed mother attaches to

Nickie's nature. Indeed, she observes how Nickie "threw her arms around her former caretaker and began, hunched and heaving, to weep on her shoulder," and she adds: "I couldn't bear to watch. There was a big black zigzag across my heart" (Moore, "Thank" 190). Nickie's affectional engagement with her nanny and the use of Portuguese with her prove how crucial Maria has been as a mothering figure, closer than her own mother.

Typifying the mother's desire for emotional connection with her female other is her topic on connectivity, which she discusses in regards with cerebral white matter when talking about Maria's white dress: at Nickie's claim that she should wear grey "[t]o acknowledge having a brain" (183), the mother answers that "only the outer bark of the brain … is grey. Apparently the other half of the brain has a lot of white matter" (183). After striving to dismiss the rational ways of thinking symbolized in the grey matter, she gets from Nickie a snorting at her comment, implying the unsalvageable generation gap and lack of filial bond between them. In this line, Kelly argues that "mothers and children in Moore's work are frequently divided from one another and the centrality of the maternal bond to the women's self-concepts renders them disturbingly vulnerable to breakdown" (122). No doubt, this short story depicts the daughter figure not as a source of joy and solace but as the trigger of self-shame and teenager disapproval. Certainly, it is when Moore delineates real children for her protagonists—and not re-created as Benna's—that their offspring stand for the strained source of their mothers' regret and guilt, which coincides with Moore's use of more mimetic modes of fiction[1].

[1] The same poignant picture of mother-daughter tie pervades the narrative center of *Like Life*'s "Places to Look for Your Mind" and the silenced concerns of the female protagonist, mother to another teenaged daughter. In the short story, Millie, a housewife controlled and threatened by her religious husband's commands, lives in depressing loneliness and gives free rein to her emotional needs by regretting her lost connections with both her son Michael, who left the familiar home long ago, and her cold and self-interested daughter Ariel, now abroad. Estranged from Ariel, always distant and mocking to her mother, Millie entertains a feeling of childlessness that makes her recreate older conversations and produces new dialogues with her daughter, causing a desperate surge of bewilderedness and putting her in a mental condition verging on insanity. The trajectory of this protagonist is indeed recalled in the short story's unnamed mother and her anxious concerns about failed single motherhood.

The mother's acts of self-expression are precluded by the traditional male-dominated family models, her depressing thoughts boycotting her own mothering role and her relationship with Nickie. Her daughter also proves influenced by sexist conventional mindsets that punish the visibility of her mother's female body. Indeed, after the mother remembers her use of her naked body as a protective device to shoo Nickie's complaint, she claims that "[o]nly nakedness was silencing, but at least something was" (Moore, "Thank" 183). As a source of disgust, her current self-concept of her bodily existence ascribes to Rich's evaluation of the female body: "The woman's body, with its potential for gestating, bringing forth and nourishing new life, has been through the ages a field of contradictions: a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability; a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil" (*Born* 102). Of significant importance is the fact that it is her own daughter, ingrained with the male-dominating ideology on motherhood, who disqualifies the narrator's body as an epitome of her sexual identity. Actually, the mother's lack of confidence in her bodily identity renders her self-embarrassed, which intensifies her estrangement with her mothering functions.

The narrator's poor bodily self-image concurs with the challenge of Benna's sexual identity, as also does Benna's body play a key role in her interaction with the others. In her story, however, it is not her daughter but her male interlocutors who destabilize her own self-image. After Gerard's questioning of her sexual activity, she counterbalances his standpoint by discussing her almost asexual behavior when she was younger, which, through misspelling, she reveals to continue being so: "The Nun of That. That's what they call me" (Moore, *Anagrams* 103). By self-identifying as an unconventionally asexual woman and yet regretting it, her answer shows how patriarchal value judgments on female sexuality achieve to bewilder woman's social self: her embodied performance and sexual comportment prove unable to conform to sex-role

socialization in a hypocritical culture that will never approve of her sexual activity, no matter what it is. Although hers, thus, is a conflicted behavior that exposes the contradictions of such society, she is engulfed by these, inherent in her own worldview about women's sexuality. Her affair with Darrel is paramount in this respect. Once the relationship starts feeling like "premature marriage" (136), she points at her self-blamed body's functions for sexual pleasure as the implicit origin of this crisis: bored Darrel sleeping next to her, "I clasp my bare breasts to make sure that they're still there" (136).

Benna's and the unnamed mother's misgivings about their sexuality prove to be enforced by a sexist ideology that assigns paramount meaning to female bodily behavior while ideologically restricting the freedom of its movement and the owner's enjoyment of it. Interpreting the body in terms of its possible motioned interactions with its environment, Young reasons corporeal reality "as capacities by which it can approach, grasp, and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions" (145). Contextualized in this framework, her studies prove how other- and self-imposed restrictions on movement under male-dominated structures force the female individual to live her body as a burden (Young 146). The unnamed mother and Benna represent Young's notion that, increasing their "feeling of incapacity, frustration, and self-consciousness," women "feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our body … rather than paying attention to what we want to do *through* our bodies" (144). However, operating on the feminine body as a force greater than that of a tool towards its goal is inherent in the body theories of second-wave feminist critics such as Cixous or Lorde. Significantly, Cixous's formulation on feminine writing and its centrality in the development of female identity takes toehold in an exclusively pleasurable experience of woman's sexuality. Women's definitional trait is precisely that of an expansive body, "a whole composed of parts that are wholes, … a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble"

(Cixous 889). Continuing Cixous's encouraging praise of the self-assertive attributes of the female bodily functions, Audre Lorde calls for women's "Uses of the Erotic," what she defines as a "self-connection" only achieved when what is being done is respectfully shared with the beloved others (Lorde 57). The erotic knowledge, thus, "becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence" (57).

Although, when in interaction with patriarchal ideology, their corporeal reality and artistic mindsets are forced into silence, Benna's and the unnamed mother's artistry and bodily enjoyment are still overarchingly inherent in their sense of self. In the short story, the protagonist's first action already shows her creative abilities: "The day following Michael Jackson's death, I was constructing my own memorial for him" (Moore, "Thank" 177). Her early constructing act anticipates the reinvention of her identity at the end of the story while her focus on music in the shape of a memorial foreshadows the crucial role it is going to play in her self-revealing process. Indeed, to the literary sensibilities immanent in the protagonist's narration and metatextual qualities of its characters adheres the importance of music, which gains significance at moments when it establishes an intertextual relation with the characters' feelings by underscoring their damaged personalities. To this extent, the narrator's acute sensibility for music suggests her motherhood crisis when Ian sings "Waters of March" (180). The narrator establishes a reflecting connection with the wedding's Brazilian family and focuses on the mother's happy pride on seeing her daughter getting married. The protagonist lacks these filial emotions with her daughter, which she nevertheless parodies in her self-deprecating outlook by reinventing the lyrics to the song: "My mind imitated the song by wandering: A stick. A stone. A wad of cow pie. A teary mom's eye" (180). The denouement, moreover, is interwoven by the mother's thread of symbolism and intertextuality with previous parts of the narrative as well as with classical mythology.

The bunch of hired bikers who irrupt into the wedding pronounce a speech the mother takes as a symbol of her situation. The biker's words are addressed to the bride and groom:

> We just know that life can get quite startling in its switches of channels … Which is why as life moves rudely past, you have to give it room. We understand that. An occasion like this means No More Forks in the Road. All mistakes are behind you, and that means it's no longer really possible to make one … The errors a person already made can step forward and announce themselves and then freeze themselves into a charming little sculpture garden that can no longer hurt you. (188)

If, according to the biker, love unions in the shape of marriage are unique in the redeeming of past wrongs and mistakes—which, once overcome, get out of oneself and are petrified—, this turns extremely ironic given the actual addressees of the speech (Maria and Hank), the best man to the wedding (Ian), and the mother's and daughter's reflecting characterizations on them. There is certainly no unique wedding to Maria's life: as the mother had reflected before, she moves from one marriage to the next; therefore, the current wedding is not likely to trigger a new beginning with no mistakes. It is precisely the current wedding that which fosters what may be her old mistake: Ian, an error that Maria had already overcome by moving on her relationship with Hank.

In this sense, the tale's mirror game between Maria and Nickie as opposed to Ian and the mother implies a suggesting reading of the mother's crisis. Both errors and missingness have been said to accumulate in one's past: if, in the biker's words, mistakes can be prevented by establishing long-lasting love bonds, it follows that missingness can be similarly kept at bay at celebrations of any kind, such as a wedding. In such reasoning, if Ian embodies Maria's errors in life, the unnamed mother's petrified state (190) after Nickie's humiliating implicatures about her motherhood symbolizes the missingness and feeling of regret, represented through the "big black zigzag" (190) in her heart at seeing

Nickie's fond interaction with Maria. This reading, no doubt, pictures herself as her daughter's greatest mistake, which is symbolically enhanced by Ian's actions, as they provide the unnamed narrator with a cathartic process.

On running after the biker, Ian is actually portrayed as "trotting slowly towards him with the chair over his head," just before "howling, chair overhead, though the motorcycles were quickly out of sight" (189-190): seeing these actions against the biker's understanding of one's past mistakes, the mother pictures Ian's image as a walking entity that steps forward and freezes itself over the horizon, suggesting a distanced sculpture and typifying Maria's frozen error. At the same time, the protagonist's ongoing taste for camouflage had identified herself with a leopard that blends in its habitat to avoid snakes, the predator that in the frightened mother's context symbolizes Nickie's aggressiveness. Associating Nickie with the predating snakes allows for a mythical interpretation of her behavior that is emphasized by her power, along with Maria's, to petrify her prey. While in such a reasoning Maria and Nickie represent the dangerous Medusa as described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—where the monster turns everyone that looks in her eyes into freezing stone—, Ian and the mother epitomize the petrified state of her victims. However, it is precisely this victimized condition that provides the mother the only source of her transformation into the winged Perseus. If, as writer Italo Calvino remembers, "[t]o cut off Medusa's head without being turned to stone, Perseus … fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror" (4), it is by cathartically seeing Ian's forward movements and her daughter's violent approaches mirrored on Maria's abusive procedures with her lovers that the protagonist overcomes her frozen state, defeats her predator's threat and finds herself riding her Pegasus.

Certainly, it is her new hopeful reflection on what the biker may have meant—"Everyday there was something new to mourn and something old to celebrate" (Moore,

"Thank" 190)—that foresees her growing insight into her unfreezing crisis. In the same fashion in which Benna appropriates and translates the institutional workings of love, motherhood and language into her make-believe narratives so as to survive the hostile menace of the outer world, the unnamed mother accepts her daughter's rejection of her conflicted love and affirms herself as her daughter's mistake. What the protagonist considers reasons for celebrating may indeed refer to the space emptied by her mourning, this is, her chance for identity self-construction. What is more, she now welcomes Michael Jackson's music, which had previously been aligned with her memorial for his death and her fiasco at cooking the chickens. Her dancing to this singer, thus, metaphorizes her assuming observations on her own mistaken identity, which she now appropriates and transforms into self-forgiveness. She still reflects how "you had to unfreeze your feet, take blind steps backward, risk a loss of balance, risk an endless fall, in order to give life room" (191). By having stepped forward like Ian, she both became petrified and celebrated herself as Nickie's mistake and her own missing of her daughter's love; by stepping backward, she unfreezes and forgives herself from imposed maternity, thereby opening the door for a blank identity she can now fill in by her own choice.

On her transformation process, eating enables her to think that "I would resemble a large vertical snake who had swallowed a rat" (191): in what appears to be a swapping disguise game, it is now the mother who scares its prey. Such a movement symbolizes her new identity construction, whereby she overcomes her fear of Nickie's predating criticism of her role as a single mother. That she assumes self-confidence by becoming someone else again allows for further parallelisms with Benna: certainly, feigning the opposite of what she has always been again showcases the imaginative processes whereby women under patriarchal systems can survive. She reasons her newly acquired self as that

of Medusa: not only because made of snakes is the monster's head but also because she gets to frozenly eschew her former wrongs and misery.

And, although she partly stays the same (the ending portrays the image of a drunken, lonely woman that recalls Benna's eventual actions), such image pictures a hopeful ending: it is actually at the celebration of love bonds where her new ongoing self is baptized. Unburdened with the roles of single mother and abandoned wife, her state showcases that of Benna under Adrienne Rich's suggestive idea on motherhood, which she considers just "one part of female process" (*Born* 36-37), as well as her notion on the letting-the-children-go-process, which is "an act of revolt against the grain of patriarchal culture" (*Born* 37). And it is actually through the meaning conveyed by the mother to music that transformation can take place: she lets her body loose by stepping backwards and then stepping forward, thus delineating dancing moves on her unfettered body, which allows for physical bond and unity with Ian's father. Following Lorde's thoughts on the erotic, the mother overcomes the guilty context of compulsory motherhood and patriarchal dominancy and finds herself able to establish a rapturous connection with a new male other with whom dance "forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding" (Lorde 56). This gives birth to a new self that is not thought in opposition to the figure of Ian's father but as an independent self who enjoys her sharing with him, her uninhibited body movement holding sway. Thus, the mother sets her up-to-now dormant passion for dancing in motion as her means for self-expression: her act of forgiveness is performed through dance and enjoyed in the body.

The unnamed mother's artistic and musical sensibilities are also shared by Benna, whose theatricality along with her linguistic insights are inextricably related with her gendered female body. The most compelling enjoyment of her body is established through the intimate language between Benna and Georgianne. An edulcorated yet

realistic projection of the emotional care she most longs for, George offers her the liberating movement she cannot perform in her outer reality. Their relationship is indeed founded on the communicative functions of their bodies, conveyed by the fond diction created by their physical touch—as Benna says, "I put my nose in her ear. … She giggles and butts her head into my underarm. This is our language of reassurance" (Moore, *Anagrams* 66). These tender yet poignant moments show how Benna's make-believe enables her to operate out of the normative behavioral conventions for women in society, which results in, as Garner espouses, the recovering and owning of her own "body in … its capacity for expressivity" (212). Her female connection with her female other cues Benna's command of her erotic nature in Lorde's understanding: as she claims, "[t]he erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (53). It is certainly these instances, based on the sensorial interaction of the body, the source of Benna's profound pleasure: on bathing George and marveling "that the human race has managed to create such comforts for itself as the warm fluffy nubs of towels, the squirming, nearsighted silk of daughters" (Moore, *Anagrams* 146), she experiences utmost joy in the interplay of her consciousness with magic, represented by the imagined flesh of her daughter.

And, although at the end of the story Benna continues finding solace in the intimate interplay with her imagined daughter, the closure of the novel still pictures her lonely self on a journey out of her miserable emotional depravity. Even if the same could be argued about the unnamed mother, whose last image portrays a drunken lady, the development until the final stage of their stories and the key role played by their daughters in it have different impact on their outcomes. Contrary to the feeling of linguistic enlargement and mutual eroticism entertained by Benna in her interaction with her fantastic child for most of the novel, the unnamed mother's depressing sense of life failure

is certainly heightened by her teenaged daughter through her disparaging outlook on her mother's misgivings. However, that the daughter represents a source of deprecation and remorse is what encourages the unnamed mother's confrontation with the reality she eventually enjoys at the wedding. Following Moore's depiction of everyday life in a realist fashion in her later work, the unnamed mother shuns from any fantasy involving her relationship with her daughter and faces a fighting counterpoint against which she is able to reconstruct her sense of self. Having a real, straining daughter provides her with real, courageous ways to overcome her identity crisis: in communion with her dancing partner, she surely adjusts her modified bodily identity to the world's harsh ways. Therefore, the blockaded mother-daughter bond triggers a sense of improvement, which offers an ending note more hopeful than the self-exile carried out in Benna's make-believe world. At Nickie's Medusa-like petrification of her mother's mistaking identity, the protagonist acquires Perseus' strength, which "always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden" (Calvino 5). And, by accepting her self-blaming burden, she plunges into the awakening joy of the self-connecting instance.

b. Daughterhood: "What Is Seized" and "Which Is More Than I Can Say About Some People"

> There are things that make me laugh, but often they are grim things, and they will not make a good happy memory either, unless I share them with someone else. Then it is not the amusement but the sharing of it that makes the happy memory. (Lydia Davis, *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant*)

Although it is in most of Moore's fiction where the main female characters skim some entangled maternal inheritance in the background of the narration, there are specific

short stories' protagonists whose narratives entirely unravel their identities as daughters by thematizing their conflicted bond with their mothers. Such problematics are insistently present in her earliest short story collection, *Self-Help:* parodying how-to guiding literature coaching women in their lives' cornerstones and crises, this volume makes use of the mock second person imperative in most of its pieces to stage turning points in ordinary women's experiences. And, although following this narrative and thematic pattern is indeed the story entitled "How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)," it is another piece in the collection, "What is Seized," that personalizes in Lynnie's first-voice account women's handling of strained memories of their dead mothers. Later in her work, Moore resumes her compelling interests in the multifarious portrayal of daughterhood by delineating Abby Mallon's private reflections on her Irish road trip and the journey shared with her old mother, contained in "Which Is More Than I Can Say About Some People" from the collection *Birds of America.* And, continuing the narrative prominence of different women in her earlier fiction, the protagonists of these short stories share with their mother counterparts, already analyzed, the gender-specific inflection of their crises.

In "What is Seized," Lynnie's series of narrative accounts set at the center of the story her own perspective on her dead mother's repeated mistreatment at the hands of Lynnie's father and the traumatic effects this upbringing has had on her own experience. The first line of the story sets the tone for the rest of the series: when Lynnie claims, "My mother married a cold man" (Moore, *"*Seized*"* 25), the disengaged tag that addresses her father's parenting condition—this is, her failure to deem her father as such—anticipates her gender-based identification with her mother's suffering, increasingly amounting throughout the story. Moreover, the use of the first-person voice in the collection, according to Kelly, groups this narrative together with those that revolve around "an integrated conception of the links between physical, mental, and emotional suffering"

where “physiological and psychic disorders figure variously as symptoms or causes of, or metaphors for, the absence or inadequacy of love” (Kelly 22). In fact, the progressive fading away of her mother’s strong vitality in her commentary of her photos, her poignant memories of her mother, and her own remembrance of her childhood harrowing experiences originate in her mother’s loveless relationship with her abusive father.

In her narrativization of her father’s social behavior, Lynnie characterizes him within the patriarchy-engendered limits of the public and private sphere: she contrasts the leading actor’s kind, affable, funny outside face and his conduct at the private corners of the home, where not only is he distant, uncommunicable and negligent of his children but also enjoys the commanding mistreatment of his depressed wife Anna. Lynnie’s narration of the memories of her father delineates an increasing detachment and rejection of his paternal figure that departs from an already ambiguous outlook on their bond when she was a child. The narrator’s first innocence-hued memory of one of her father’s rehearsals at the theatre is very telling in this respect. Following Lynnie’s metaphorical acknowledgement that her father held an amusing façade that his family was not used to seeing—as she recalls, “My father would say things during scene cuts on stage that we couldn’t hear but that made everyone laugh” (Moore, “Seized” 29)—is the father’s loveless treatment of his children: “[he would] … head busily backstage to *take care of something* … we’d race to her [mother], like racing home, … as if *looking for something*” (29, my emphasis). In such instance, Lynnie shows to be conscious of the contrast between what their father took care of (his ego) and what the children were looking for (signs of love, this time from their mother). As a burden to her father, Lynnie evokes the moments when he used to play cards in order to showcase the manipulative handling of his children and, yet, her awareness of his cheating (35): she acknowledges her early

obliviousness of her father's false ways, which, as the only means whereby he would communicate with the children, she would refuse to discover and deconstruct.

The cold, calculating, scheming personality he would show in the private sphere with his family contrasts with his furious beatings of his wife—as she evokes, there was "something metal always clinking somewhere to the floor" (Moore, "Seized" 32). These beltings were combined with his psychological disparagement, an example of which the narrator remembers with utmost poignancy. The moment when he criticizes his wife's physical shape has a huge emotional impact on her mother, whose answer, her "running along the lake in sweatclothes and old sneakers she didn't mind getting wet" (34), speaks of the punishment she submits herself into in the name of female obedience. On the way, the mother notices dead birds with rotten eyes and claims the phrase that gives title to Lynnie's narrative, "What is beautiful is seized" (34). Then, she not only self-identifies with the dead animals in the destruction of their eyes—this is, through the pun on the word, of their selves—but she also hints at the gender-based nature of her struggle: she withdraws the refrain from her maternal lineage, suggesting how it is women's eyes, the originally patriarchy-uncorrupted self, that is seized by sexist ideology.

In turn, the fact that it is Lynnie who kept her mother company on these exhausting walks voices her will to help her articulate her intuited suffering. Yet, it also intimates her failure at understanding the deepness of her mother's feelings, as well as her own anger for the disparaging union that fettered her mother's freedom, reasoning marriage as a mandatory institution that, at the time, she was approaching. According to Chodorow, sex-role socialization delineates the girl's primary identification with the systems responsible for women's functions in society: as she claims, "[a] girl's conflicts, rather, are about whether or not she wants this identity, an identity reliant on her ability to inhibit herself and to respond to the demands of others" (Chodorow, *Feminism* 42). Indeed, her

downer perspective as a daughter witnessing her mother's suffering drives her to engage with her pain as the description of the abuses go on, thereby encompassing mistreatment as an essentially female predicament.

Her mother's struggle, in fact, becomes Lynnie's own insofar as her mother goes on realizing her mistreated submission and accusing her husband of his cold, unsensitive, aggressive personality. As Lynnie registers this process, the episodic fragments reflect her pitying the oppressed state of her mother's mental health. Lynnie's eventual disengagement from her father's fake posture and her definite identification with her mother's perspective comes in a crucial scene that forks into two memories: while the first represents at the theatre the father's rehearsal of his part including "a lilting list of parental love promises" (Moore, "Seized" 35), the second flashforwards to years later, when her mother explains what Lynnie had been sensing throughout her life and never realized. At her mother's confession that "[h]e never spent time with you kids, never sang to you or took you places," her father's divide between his inside cruelty and his outside fondness finally becomes clear to Lynnie, who acknowledges the truth of the mother's claims by admitting his negligence and abuses (36).

After this epiphanic incident, Lynnie assumes the sadness and oppression inherent in the life development of her female other, which she recreates in the picture of her mother as a teenager by self-identifying with her face of "scrutiny, a look of waiting, of preparedness" (Moore, "Seized" 31). At the same time, Lynnie acknowledges her mother as a special specimen of her mothering condition by highlighting her physical allure and outlining how she "was the only mother I knew who wore her hair long" (31), which speaks of her particular femininity and her cravings for freedom against the patriarchal codes of conventional feminine conduct. It is through her mother's free hair whereby her father actually channels the punishment of his wife's beauty: when Lynnie transcribes her

memory of her friend Rachel's visit (32) as well as the mother's confusing night visits into the children's room (33), it is her hair outfit that stands out as increasingly damaged and forsaken. And the fact that the adult Lynnie cannot remember what the occasion of this specific night visit was not only implies the recurrence of her father's physical violence but also the traumatic effects these experiences left on her selfhood, articulated through unintentional obliviousness, which has continued until her current self-estranged sense of identity. On this track, she conveys her view on her parents' divorce through the second person voice and associates it with her own feel of identity fragmentation. When she confesses how "[w]hen your parents divide, you, too, bifurcate" (42), the change into the second person, as Kelly argues, "reflects the narrator's self-objectification—her sense of being distanced or divided from herself" (Kelly 27): this traces her present sense of displacement back to the memories of the events that carried traumas in her early youth.

Lynnie's detachment from her remembered life experiences is replicated in Abby's unpoliced handling of her own life undertakings. In "Which is More Than I Can Say About Some People," Abby and Mrs. Mallon share a road trip in Ireland, which Abby sets as part of her pilgrimage towards a self-improving process whereby she may overcome her fear of public speech by kissing the Blarney Stone and acquiring the gift of eloquence. Her position as a writer for a company greatly matches her introvert outlook—as she takes proud in thinking, "she got to work with words in a private way. The speech she made was done in the back, alone" (Moore, "People" 25)—and yet her boss' decision to promote her a public speaker fills her with fear and ambition for self-improvement alike. Her goal-oriented mindset does not prevent her from entertaining self-doubt at her own standpoints on love, which differ from the societal notions of love relationships in the same fashion in which those of *Anagrams*' Benna do. As she tries to adapt herself to marriage with her new husband, she questions the conventionalisms of such institution,

which deals with a routine of loneliness and lust that, by asking repeatedly the same nervous question, she intimates it to be insufficient: “how could it not be love, surely nature intended it to be, surely nature with its hurricanes and hail was counting on this to suffice?” (26). Abby indeed advances Benna’s contrasting conflict between her hermetic inner world and her view of an unattainable outer world. Abby prefers the written word and rejects societal codes of public speaking, which suggests both her bewildering self-isolation and the demand for her right to believe there is something more comprehensive beyond the fixed strictures of the love relationship in which she is engaged.

Her inability to adjust her ambitious, restless yet lonely, unexpressed identity into normative codes of conduct is what pervades the conversation with her mother. Contrasting with Benna’s affectional relationship with her imaginative daughter, however, the function of Abby’s mother in these ordeals is tensioned: she looms herself as the opposition to Abby’s self-improving outlook on love and life, which further underscores Abby’s conflict with her mother and thus with her own self as gender-based. The very inclusion of Mrs. Mallon on this trip is paragon of this strained relationship between them: although she wants to come along as she is willing to explore her Irish origins in the same way that Abby requires her to drive a stick shift car, both complementary characters are reluctant to acknowledge their need for the other and it is the mother who exerts the most aggressive attack on Abby. Her continual comparison of Abby with her Down-syndrome sister Theda pictures Mrs. Mallon as a mean-spirited mother that holds resentment and bitterness for her daughter, which Abby resigned herself to long ago. Therefore, the short story’s title reinforces the painful bond between them as it refers back to the mother’s recurrent disapproval of her daughter’s detachment from the others—as opposed to Theda’s kindness (Moore, “People” 26). The title, thus, pinpoints

the sarcastic aggressiveness that her mother exerts on Abby, a disparaging treatment that she has always endured and that has marked her sense of self and sexual identity.

Certainly, the road trip features maternal turns that, far from mothering, are undermining of her own daughter's personality. Moreover, their contrasting behaviors ensue their characterizations as foils and it is Abby herself who foreshadows what the topic conversation will be between the two: when Mrs. Mallon mocks her after speaking out her fear of the political landscape in Northern Ireland, she acknowledges how that "was quickly becoming the theme of their trip … That Abby had no courage and her mother did. And that it had forever been that way" (28). Opposed to what seems to be her mother's nonchalant behavior, Abby feels that her vulnerabilities are the center of their struggling dialogue, which makes her grow a defensive attitude that suggests fear of something beyond this: her mother's disapproval and rejection, a complex channeled through her own insecurities. As such, their blockaded mother-daughter bond has deep psychic effects on Abby despite Mrs. Mallon's emotional distance. Once Mrs. Mallon gets out of the car in order to cross the rope bridge on her own after cursing Abby's fear, the power of remembrance of Abby's childhood is set in motion along with the "true loneliness of this trip" (29). After her mother's undermining of her personal traits and her temporary abandonment to go to the bridge, Abby no doubt finds herself unable to adjust her vulnerable character to the detaching manners of her mother.

In this context, both Abby and Lynnie experience moments of self-estrangement originating within the kernel of their conflicted bonds with their mothers, who are also detached from yet needy of their daughters, a contradiction that Adrienne Rich views in the desire "to find the mutual confirmation from and with another woman that daughters and mothers alike hunger for, pull away from, make possible or impossible for each other" (*Born* 218). That Mrs. Mallon and Anna may have had differing experiences within the

familiar structure does not result in contrasting bonds with their daughters, as both Abby and Lynnie find themselves lacking motherlove, an absence that Rich justifies by alluding to women's deprived power in conventional marriage: "Few women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough … it is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations" (*Born* 243). Precisely, it is Abby herself who seems to find the explanation for her adult introvert attitude in her mother's present disparagement, which has been held throughout her life: she recalls how "she and her mother had never been very close," even feeling that, when she was a child, "her mother had always repelled her a bit" (Moore, "People" 30). Acknowledging the low self-esteem caused by her mother's deprecation, she pictures a distant woman who cannot feel mothering love for her and, thus, has never embodied erotic physicality. Indeed, the fact that her memory of looking at Mrs. Mallon's naked body in the bathroom when she was a child drives her to "decide that perhaps it hadn't been her mother at all" (30) revives Abby's feeling of pain and her desire for oblivion of an event that has turned traumatic in her present life—similar to Lynnie's obliviousness of her father's mistreatment.

This sense of emotional abandonment is underscored by Abby's current sexual behavior within the strictures of conventional love relationships and her mother's strong criticism of them. "Abby's marriage and its possible demise" (Moore, "People" 30), this is, her lack of conventional assertiveness when dealing with partner ties in her middle-age is what Mrs. Mallon has been mocking by playing on the pun "ruined abbey" on their trip, further lambasting what she takes to be Abby's conceit in marital relationships (30). The origins of the conflicted mother-daughter bond and thus of Mrs. Mallon's resentment towards Abby finally surface in their ongoing dialogue, which discovers Abby's ordeal as gender-specific, resulting from the generational gap between the two. Mrs. Mallon enforces Abby into the conservative values of oppression of women within the institution

of marriage by encouraging her into compulsory feminine behavior in society. In fact, she pleads Abby to continue her marriage: “Once you’re with a man, you have to sit still with him. As scary as it seems. You have to be brave and learn to reap the benefits of inertia” (31). Her standpoint on women’s position in marriage, then, envisions the martial union as a system that grants the partners, economically commodified, the prestige of social acceptance, where the feminine conduct should be that of inactive waiting. Mrs. Mallon’s description of such fixture institutionalizes women’s condition in heteroreality, where it is assessed that “every woman should be married, and that every woman's most meaningful and most satisfying relations are with men” (Raymond 38). In it, the normative physical behavior for women matches with Mrs. Mallon’s preaching, attuned to Young’s review of woman’s handling of her body, as she “underuse[s] its real capacity, both as the potentiality of its physical size and strength and as the real skills and coordination which are available to it” (Young 146).

Whereas the struggling interaction with her female other in “Thank You For Having Me” originates in the daughter, who shows inherent patriarchal assumptions on middle-aged female conduct within social contexts, now it is Abby’s old mother who represents the same sexist ideology that constricts women’s self-expression and sensual freedom. Yet, the repressed, submissive, subordinated will of Lynnie’s and Abby’s mothers in their marriages and the central role that female-based support plays in their identity crises are summarized by one of Adrienne Rich’s notions on the conflicting condition of women in patriarchal societies: “However woman-to-woman relationships … are relied on and cherished, indoctrination in male credibility and status can still create synapses in thought, denials of feeling, wishful thinking, a profound sexual and intellectual confusion” (“Compulsory” 646). Rich’s further claim that the mother under suppressing systems “identifies intensely with her daughter, but through weakness, not

through strength" (*Born* 244) speaks volumes to the imperative voice spoken by Mrs. Mallon to her daughter urging her to eschew her freedom and adapt to the normative codes of marriage, which Abby persistently rejects. In Abby's case, the fact that she uncovers the dangers of silencing one's emotions by alluding to her own father's surges of physical violence at his repression (Moore, "People" 31) not only gets across her desire to give free rein to her trapped bodily reality but also explains her lifetime fear of self-expression in the shape of traumas caused by her emotionally disengaging family. In this vein, the whole power struggle between mother and daughter comes epitomized by their estranged position in the car: driving on the left, their interchanged seats and, thus, Abby's lack of control of the wheel stage her deprivation of self-autonomy and responsibility in her own attempts for self-improvement, as Kelly suggests (126).

What Kelly fails to notice, however, is that Abby's confusion is replicated in Mrs. Mallon in her first interaction with the new reality she is dealing with. Mrs. Mallon's abrupt yet hesitating handling of the car—"Her steering was jerky and her foot jumped around on the floor, trying to find the clutch" in a zig zag drift (Moore, "People" 27)—indeed foreshadows the signs unveiling her show of aggressive courage precisely as such: a fake display. This contradictory show is symbolized by the conflict between her exhibiting will to go to the rope bridge and her fixity on the safety represented by the guidebook she has insistently used to reach the place. Contrary to Abby's revealing of her fears, a repeatedly overreacted dramatic quality is held to her mother's interactions, emphasized by her exaggerated turns of violent language and demanding attitude, which in the end employs a tone of pretend to camouflage her vulnerabilities. In her discussion of love relationships, it is precisely disguise and pretend not only what she encourages Abby to follow in her own marriage but also what she employs in the present interaction with her: the inertia she recommends her daughter to follow is contradicted by her sudden

overtaking of a truck despite the warning of danger on the road (31). That she so nonchalantly yet so harshly criticizes Abby's unattached position in her marriage, thus, should be no wonder: in the same way that what she takes as bravery in marriage is, ironically, plain inaction, conformity and voicelessness, her statement about inertia paradoxically triggers her aggressive advance forward, the inconsistency of which pictures a sense of courage that increasingly reveals itself as simple pretense.

Surely, even when Mrs. Mallon enjoys a moment of self-connection by remembering her childhood and playing with the marionettes in the store next to the castle (Moore, "People" 32), she does so in privacy while she covers the self-pitying speech about her fast maturation as a child with an implied touch of dramatism and show—she pronounces it "taking the bag and looking off into the middle distance" (32). However, she goes on unraveling this ambiguity when subsequently dealing with her feelings and their expression. Anticipating her mother's exposure of her unspoken fears at the Blarney Castle, Abby's early notice that they "felt lost—but not in an uncharming way," going "places unmarked on the map" (27) on a trip in Ireland that symbolizes "a trip into the past of America" (27) already marks the journey's exploration of each other's past and present and the role each will play in one another's emotional growth on the trip, which proves self-revelatory. The fact that Abby's maternal ancestry is Irish presents this trip as a journey into their mutual origins, which are revised through each's memories, as well as into their current relationship, which sheds its rust by adjusting to their life stories. Abby's interpretation of the car as a "wheeled and metal womb" (30) envisions the trip as a shared, developing, unbreakable capsule that will deliver altered identities and a new mother-daughter bond. On this track, the seats, interchanged between mother and daughter, metaphorize the distorting effects of this trip on their relationship and symbolize the new instances of communication. Such move also represents the

overturning of Mrs. Mallon's disparagement with Abby's fears and thus concludes with the fearful behavior of the mother and the mothering approach of the daughter, which echoes Lynnie's maternal care of her mistreated mother.

In fact, if Abby's story employs the Celtic tradition of the Blarney Stone to contextualize their mother-daughter bond and interaction, Lynnie views the relationship with her mother against the reversed backdrop of the Greek myth of Ceres and Proserpine. The mutual reflection of each other's identity and function on her counterpart speaks of the helpless fashion in which their common life has constructed Lynnie's identity as her mother's caretaker. Indeed, she thinks of this tie as "mothers and daughters switching places—women switching places to take care of one another. You, the daughter, becoming the mother, the Ceres, and she the daughter, kidnapped to hell, and you roam the earth to find her, to mourn her" (Moore, "Seized" 43). The self-distancing second person gets across her desperation in trying to restore her traumatized mother into the original human being that she once was. However, Lynnie's self-acknowledged mourning not only conveys the impossibility of recovering an identity she has barely known but also speaks of her own carrying of a burden that leaves her voiceless and exhausted.

The remembrance of her mother's mistreatment and its effect in her increasingly dejected life experience plot the course of Lynnie's life in the shape of trauma. There are in fact repeated allusions of her later reinterpretation of ideas or emotions experienced in her childhood and turned into traumatic events for the rest of her life experience. When she points out that it is the weight of the physical contact and dialogue with one's mother "what you seize, save, carry around in little envelopes" (Moore, "Seized" 40), Lynnie diversifies the meanings of seizing by contrasting the unbearable way she goes on understanding her mother's and her own ordeal with her father's invasive conquest of Anna's honest love. In this line, Lynnie admits still being haunted by her mother's

spasmic gestures of asphyxiation after her suicide attempt, which both speaks of her status as a witness and observer of her mother's suffering and hampers the possibility of her own life narrativization: "Even years later I would see that face—in my own, in photos, in mirrors" (40). And she also refers to the disturbing effect that the chair where her father used to hurt her mother produced on later stages of her maturity: "But there is no one, just my father, sitting way across the room form her, in a white and rose upholstered chair (something later moved to my room at college, something I would sit in, stare at)" (36). Symbolizing the sustenance and fixity of patriarchy, Lynnie sitting in that defamiliarized chair makes her question her mother's domestic existence, her own confusing identification with her father and thus her innocent yet complicit role in her mother's oppression. Textually, this traumatized condition is reflected on her linear yet disjoined discourse and the authorial silence hovering over the narrative accounts.

The different time frames in which the episodic stories are set, although following a chronological development overall, are intermingled throughout the narrative. Moreover, the texture of the narrative accounts is made of Lynnie's juxtaposition of her visual interpretation of her mother's photos and the written letters between the two with the narrativization of both her own remembrances and the feelings that her mother expressed to her as an adult. Certainly, the beginning epitomizes this narrative structure: after narrating her father's coldness towards her mother even when they had sex, Lynnie adds that "[s]he told me this before she died. She just stared off to one side at the drapes and told me" (Moore, "Seized" 25). This anticipates the rest of this juxtaposed organization and its effect on the narrative: how her own remembrance of her mother's near and distant past life changes both the way she interprets her own history and the way she understands her present. Her mother's traumatic obsession with the seizing of what is left of one's original beauty comprises the other structural element that organizes the

accounts, which endows the story with a title and becomes the text's refrain: by repeating this chorus, Lynnie acknowledges the pervasive influence of this idea in her imaginings.

On the same track, the snapshots that contain Lynnie's interpretation of her mother's pictures are always introduced through the same anaphoric repetition. In it, Lynnie reasons her mother's experiences in the poignant attempt to understand a mothering figure that has been confessing her miserable emotional life to her daughter in intermittent bits. In this sense, Roland Barthes assays the paradox found in the recalling effect that pictures have on the observer: "Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory … but it actually blocks memory … The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed" (*Camera* 91). By looking at the woman she has never known as well as recalling the mistreated mother she has always suffered for, Lynnie employs the photographic medium to project her own consciousness and recreate a chronological, coherent sense of her mother's self. She therefore benefits from the contents that it reveals about her mother. Yet, as opposed to what Barthes claims, she interprets and transforms the reality of the photos with her scattershot memories, "images," as Walter Benjamin writes, "that, severed from all earlier associations, reside as treasures in the sober rooms of our later insights" (Benjamin 576).

It is significant that only on perceiving the glee social circle of her mother's premarital life is her mother's name pronounced in the whole narrative (Moore, "Seized" 32), intimating the notion that it was before tying herself to her abusive husband when she felt a self-realized concept of identity. In fact, Lynnie is trying to discover this under the layers of Anna's mothering and wife roles. She juxtaposes the description of the photos of her mother as a child with the memories of her younger self browsing those photos, overlapping thus the same stages of their life stories in order to recall what she

used to love doing as a child: “to know her, to become her, to make my mother a woman with adventures” (27). In effect, as a child Lynnie desired to spare her mother and herself the father’s mistreatment by transforming their identities into someone else’s and freeing themselves, like Benna and the unnamed mother try to undertake.

Contributing to the alienating effect that the use of the second person has on her interaction with her childhood traumas is the silence of the adult narrative voice, which sets the confessional tone to what becomes a self-questioning text. Certainly, the overall lack of her present judgements throughout the narrative is twofold. Not only does it evidence her increasing understanding of her mother’s ordeal through the recalling of the mistreatment she witnessed but never spoke about—and the endurance of traumatic experiences that left her voiceless—but it also conveys her own guilt and shame in the complicit role she feels she has had in the abuse of her mother. Such confessional, self-critical character surfaces when she includes undiscussed letters containing random experiences about her hectic life at college. The juxtaposition of this with her mother’s stay at hospital after being beaten, for instance, gets across Lynnie’s pity for her younger self, unable to process her mother’s suffering, which in turn shows her attempt for survival—she at last justifies her attitude when she wonders “what else I could have written … I didn’t lie: there were a lot of tests” (46). However, it also intensifies the adult’s exposure of her own self-centered, thoughtless, (un)consciously disengaged outlook on her mother’s pain at the time and thus her implied agency in her oppression, thereby suggesting her current feeling of regret and shame. Indeed, it is in the first and last discussion of her letters when she confesses the traumatized state that had her speechless: “those winters, looking out and seeing snow lining the elm grove like an arthritis and finding no words” (46). Suffering from a fragmented mindset and speechless mouth, it is when dealing with the real, outer world that she hides her “crying every

morning" and instead "tell[s] jokes in an Italian accent" (42), wearing a mask in the use of humorous language, disguising her misery and avoiding the straightforward expression of vulnerability in the same way that Benna, the unnamed mother and Abby do.

Lynnie's failure at expressing herself has mirrored her mother's, a reflective mother-daughter bond that, in Lynnie, has only found shelter in her longed-for bodily contact with her counterpoint. Lynnie's memories often evoke her childhood as an idealized shelter where both daughter and mother achieve a special connection through the physicality of their female bodies: she even acknowledges, through an automatized writing suggesting the fast workings of memory, her "childhood simply a series of images of her swirling into the doorway … making a tent in which, just our faces, hers and mine, lived and breathed forever" (37-38). This physical rapport involves a feel of refuge for the adult daughter's pain at fully identifying with her mother's misery and her own coming to terms with her role. In fact, the scene that remembers Lynnie eclipsed by her first observation of her mother's bruised body in the toilet (32) has an alienating impact on Lynnie; in this vein, Kelly claims about Moore's work: "[a] daughter's fear and disgust with regard to her mother's body … is always linked to the problem of knowing the mother, divining her secret self" (Kelly 127). However, this statement fails to tackle the problematization of Lynnie's relationship with her mother in the context of their mistreatment: it is in this case nothing but her mother's bodily display of damaged surrender that prevents her from recognizing her mother, which again accuses her father's punishment and profit of the female body as the deepest cause of her estrangement.

And it is her inability for self-expression and that of her damaged mother during her lifetime oppression what drives the wounded Lynnie to construct this narrative account. By reinterpreting her mother's life story and the feelings confessed in later stages, Lynnie creates a transtemporal dialogue with the memories of her mother: in so

doing, she tries to understand her ordeal as a woman trapped in the patriarchal value system and unravel her subdued, silent identity. Certainly, she is just the narrator of a story where the protagonist is her mother, whose dealings with pain and struggles for later self-expression are literarily shaped as a late tribute to her own mother, which suggests Lynnie's implied remorse for the feelings unexpressed to her. Fleshing out the purpose of her narrative thrust is the lexical connection she establishes between key components of the story: this conveys the sought-for rapport between the protagonist and the narrator through the latter's acknowledgement of the refrain her mother repeated when alive. When she recreates her mother's death by writing that "[s]omething has seized my mother in the back, arched it" (Moore, "Seized" 44), Lynnie's use of the seizing image that her mother has been employing throughout her life definitely transforms it into the crucial metaphor of her mother's story. By using it, the narrative turns into a written memorial for her mother: indeed, Lynnie subscribes to the same emotions her mother felt for her father and even blames his coldness for seizing not only Anna's premarital soul and joy but her very life. However, although it is male oppression that which seizes her, it is her daughter who collects the fragments and narrativizes them. Surely, the other metaphorical meaning of seizing describes the action of taking legal possession of what has resulted from immoral undertakings: in Anna's mistreated history, this notion of seizing interprets the daughter's reconstruction of her mother's identity as her legitimate artistic attempt to redress both her father's depraved actions and her mother's psychic and physical injuries, serving a narrative discourse that gives utterance to her silenced pain.

And not only that: in the same way that Lynnie seizes her mother's history, this narrative has seized her own. By establishing a personal interplay with the frozen image of her mother and by telling and retelling her mother's words, Lynnie narrativizes a life that modifies her own story through a mirror in which the narrator can retrospectively see

herself formed against her mother's image. That the photographic snapshots start including Lynnie's image taking care of her sick mother (43) symbolizes the way their life stories intermingle after the adult Lynnie assumes the caring of her mother's pain and, thus, how the identities of both are reflected and superimposed on one another's. This overlapping finds its scenario in Lynnie's evocation of her mother's asphyxiating face "behind mine, against mine … struggling to emerge" (40): this move measures her own speechless suffering against the backdrop of her mother's strangled voice.

In the end, the anger produced by her lifetime voicelessness finds Lynnie devising strategies according to her mother's words: although she admits having written this series of narrative accounts as a healing course, her answer can provide nothing but punishment and destruction of "every cold man" (46), which definitely proves the serious effects of the radical abuses of patriarchy in her interpersonal rapports. However, that her narrative accounts are pervaded with "bitterness" (46) suggests how only through her artistic composition can she find a particular use of language—that of vengeance—, which achieves to convey her inner feelings. This final act of outspoken expression is epitomized by the landscape of the ending: opposing the immobility of the "wordless" cans is the fluttering of the flags, which are compared to things that almost tear themselves in trying to fly (46). These flags symbolize Lynnie's compassion for her mother's nature, which has been trapped yet willing for artistic pleasure, something not only she but also her daughter attain in the literary recreation and reconstruction of their conjoined life stories.

In this vein, when Kelly discusses Lynnie's final determination in the context of the mocking self-help stories, she claims that "Moore's point is that there are no foolproof recipes for a happy and fulfilled life, that happiness comes by chance or a moment of grace" (24), the arbitrariness of which also setting in motion Abby's self-fulfilling process on the road trip with her mother. It is the time shared in the experience and not the kissing

of the Blarney Stone that which drives Abby towards her self-improvement and verbal eloquence; it is the awakening mother-daughter bond and not only eloquence that results from her progress. In Abby's case, her rapport with the visual landscape sifts the creative sensibilities that convey particular assessments of her own past and her present condition. Further exemplifying her linguistic wordplays, not only her vision of a manor house as a murderer of nature, which is "cut up into moldings and rugs" (Moore, "People" 28), but also her interpretation of the structure of a Celtic passage grave as a "deadly maternal metaphor" (28) show Abby's sensibility in the connection with her surroundings as a symbolic extension of her gloomy emotions about motherhood. This is, she seems to acquire greater knowledge about herself when she experiences the landscape in specifically bodily terms: it is Abby's sensorial hypersensitivity that settles the process that brings mother and daughter into a more satisfyingly communicative bond.

The experience at the Blarney Castle tests Abby and her mother alike but their outcomes are different. An epitome of the trust on and the need for the other's support to achieve one's goal, visitors have to lie on their backs in order to reach to the stone and kiss it, thus enacting a dangerous performance in which both the mother and Abby serve one another through the former's encouragement and the latter's care. Against Abby's insecurities, her mother makes her confront her own fears and trespass the limits of her self-demarcated identity by interacting with her, which for the first time in the narrative entails a case of emotional and pedagogical rapport with her daughter. By presenting this trial as one of the tests Abby needs to pass (33), Mrs. Mallon's pressure assists Abby: the fear that her mother's attacks produce in her gets mingled with her fear of the adventure, resulting not in her usual belittlement but in "impulsiveness" (33). Providing her with self-assertiveness to police her body and adjust it into the gap, the operation encompasses an epiphany of some sort. Abby, having failed to kiss the stone, is then able to understand

the real meaning of superstitions: they are simple means towards the confrontation of her fears, they are "a construction of wish and string and distance" (33) that evokes the symbolic conveyance of her unstable and fissured relationship with her mother and the possibilities such fragmentation offers so as to construct something new out of it.

Indeed, it is at Mrs. Mallon's turn when these possibilities are explored: her total failure at managing the scary situation definitely reveals her bravery as simple pretend and camouflage of her vulnerabilities, which, once brought into light, serve Abby to see her own fears projected onto her mother's identity. This self-reflection triggers her reinterpretation of her mother's life story, history and behavior in a new light, a novelty that boosts a modified relationship between the two and Abby's self-assessment against Mrs. Mallon's new emotional patchwork. Not only undergoing the process whereby the humanity of terror-struck Mrs. Mallon has been exposed but also her assisting her in taking down the stairs awaken Abby's newly acquired self-assertive traits, symbolized by the simile between Abby's escorting her mother by "her coat taking the updraft" and a "bat new to its wings" (34). Thus, her current feeling of confidence in her statements overthrows the previous power struggle between the two. Certainly, when Abby questions her mother's performance on the rope bridge, she resumes the metaphorical implications of their car seats, this is, the interchanging of the daughter's and mother's natural places: she finds herself appeasing Mrs. Mallon's bewilderment and confusion—traits that had previously defined Abby's character. Like Lynnie's identity, Abby sees hers overlapped with that of her mother in the feedback gained from one another: like Lynnie, Abby experiences how the evolution of her life story is determined by her reinterpretation of her female other through the emotional interplay with her.

After the visit to the castle, Abby acquires a free flow of words in the private chat with her mother, boosts her newfound confidence and proves to actually have overcome

her fear of public speaking: her loud toast encompasses repeated sentences and rhetorical questions that end up on a note resounding over the rest of the bar (35). Unlike Lynnie's story, the personal reconstruction and interpersonal development in this narrative trigger forgiving messages and new understandings of the mother-daughter bond: recalling the sad tone of her own wedding, Abby aligns with the unnamed mother in "Thank You For Having Me" and her sudden realization of the paramount significance of celebrations in life (Moore, "People" 35). Identifying the missing toast at her wedding with the missed happy moments with her mother, she celebrates Mrs. Mallon to fill the lack of happiness they never shared in the past. Abby's self-discovery through her mother's brave confessions gives further dimension to Mrs. Mallon's key role in the reconstruction of Abby's identity: "Perhaps her mother had never shown Abby affection, not really, but she had given her a knack for solitude … Abby would toast her for that" (35). Their trip thus becomes a self-realizing process that makes both daughter and mother feel more attuned to each other's confessed mutual concerns: by overcoming her fear of public speech as well as her resentment for her mother's distance, Abby broadens her capacity for love for her mother, who now values Lynnie as a courageous, self-confident, preaching woman.

Underlying Lynnie's and Abby's strained bond with their mothers are similar problematics, and yet the endings of their stories offer a greatly differing tone. When Kelly claims that the impact of Mrs. Mallon's interaction with her daughter "produce[s] a regression to childhood" in Abby (Kelly 126), she is also assaying Lynnie's looking back at her mother's life and her partaking in it to understand her self and the emptiness left by her mother's death. No doubt, although her mother is dead, Lynnie's dialogue with Anna is ongoing throughout the recreation of her life story by means of her memories and her reinterpretation of her mother's traits in the photographic discourse she includes in her memorial. However, the contrast between Anna's actual absence in Lynnie's life and

Mrs. Mallon's living company to Abby recalls a similar problematic present in *Anagrams* and "Thank You For Having Me," as it also unfurls diverging endings. Indeed, the experimentally metalinguistic devices present in the short story that shapes Lynnie's narrative stands for the protagonist's actual absence and, thus, the narrator's continuation of her lifetime uncommunication of her inner feelings with her. This dialogic shortage contrasts with the practical interchange between Abby and her mother, which enables their eventual coming to terms with each other's vulnerabilities and further identity formation: as such, Lynnie's lack of her mother's presence results in her undermined mindset in the interpersonal relationships with men. Like Benna and her solace in make-believe, Lynnie stays in self-isolation and enjoys self-connection in the memories of her revenged mother; like the unnamed mother's self-revelatory process, Abby finds in the dialogue with her mother the path towards common susceptibility, which boosts her awakening process and finalizes in a new satisfying grasp of identity.

IV. Conclusion

The development of Lorrie Moore's portrayal of mothers' and daughters' relationship with one another runs on an equal footing with the evolution of her narrative styles and literary choices in her fiction. *Anagrams* and *Self-Help,* her first novel and short story collection, sit in an early period focused on experimenting with the potentialities of fictional narrative and the challenge of literary license, whereas *Bark* and *Birds of America* include short stories attuned to a fictional style mostly based on mimetic codes of narration and, at the same time, more prone to grasping the humorous surface of life. This progression is also in harmony with the different features that sustain the depiction of the mother-daughter bonds in the stories and their final outcome.

As discussed before, the later narratives end on more optimistic notes of awakening and self-discovery whereas the first stories, because their protagonists find

means of exile from the struggles they are unable to overcome on the practical dimension of reality, encompass acts of self-isolation that further increase their marginalized condition. These are precisely the narratives where the counterparts of the main characters are missing in the flesh. Because it handicaps the protagonists from dramatizing their dialogue with a real other that may cue alternative fashions of dealing with the outer world, this absence magnifies their feeling of longing for their female others, which amounts to their suffering from unbelonging. In fact, neither Benna's nor Lynnie's stories stage the real existence of their female others, either because they are fantastically conjured up by projecting the character's desires and needs, as in Benna's make-believe world, or because they cannot be but remembered entities after their decease, such as Lynnie's memorialist narration. Contrary to this experimental mode of speaking to the missing is the more mimetic style that shapes the unnamed mother's and Abby's narratives, where the actual interaction with their female others allows the characters to continue triggering greater insights into their own identity formation until reaching an awakening process. Not only the fact that the latter mother-daughter ties have the main characters recreating less idealized images of their counterpoints but also that their stories bring about gender-based conflicts that sit at the center of the female exchanges with their others are two features that also respond to Moore's realist-attuned period. Because her narrative focus is closest to the bond itself, the stories depict the struggling insides of the interplay with the female interlocutors.

Indeed, all the characterizations in the protagonist role problematize the inability to communicate inner feelings either to their male or female others. This originates in the character's gender-specific struggles to conform to the normative codes for female conduct to which their sexual identity is supposed to adhere. On the one hand, self-articulation in Benna's conflict is only achieved through the affectionate interplay with

her imagined daughter, thereby experiencing moments of true bodily expression in the reserved space of her private make-believe. On the other hand, the unnamed mother overcomes the restrictions imposed by her daughter's criticism in her self-fulfilling awakening, which endows her with moments of erotic self-connection and body conveyance in the public sphere of her sharing with a male other. Nevertheless, the same erotic fulfillment does not take place in the daughters' identity reconstruction.

True enough, Lynnie enjoyed a close mother-daughter bond sustained on each's emotional need for the other, a relationship similar to the vulnerable terms on which Abby and her mother end at the end of their narrative. However, contributing to the remorseful memories regretting the lack of erotic interplay with their mothers, neither Lynnie nor Abby achieve the sharing of recognized feelings for their interlocutors in the form of uninhibited physical freedom or unsuppressed shared connection with the other. Both partaking in the institutional structures of the patriarchy-oriented family, the enforced strangled sense of self of Lynnie's mother or the conformingly restricted condition of Abby's mother accounts for this shortage: the oppression of women' self-connection has the same undermining effects on their daughters and prevents them from attaining the self-fulfilling shared interchange with the others. Adrienne Rich's discussion answers to this problematic: "daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted" (*Born* 235). However, it is the differing standpoints of these women, both mothers and daughters, that serve the scaffold to the rewriting of their own life stories.

No doubt, distantly present or longingly absent, vividly harsh or retrospectively idealized, the female others in all stories analyzed trigger an emotional interplay with the main characters that cues the mutual narrativization of their lives. Responding to the

female other's interchange, the character builds a hospitable dialogue with her interlocutor by assuming, registering and appropriating her words and thereby experiencing a rebirth of her new self. While in the later stories the protagonists' awakening after the conflicted interaction with their interlocutors is straightforward, the early narratives picture Benna and Lynnie finding shelter in the invention or remembrance of their female others. By recreating their interplay with them, Benna and Lynnie also experience self-harming yet illuminating insights into their own identities, which end up transformed and reconstructed. The female dialectics shared between the main character and her interlocutor in all stories, then, sets in motion her ability for creative narrativity, her escapist or confronting rebellion against oppressing systems, and a self-defined, consistent, autonomous sense of her identity. This approach to the female other and her diverging yet encouraging feedback conflates with the views purported by Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde on female relationships in what later became third-wave feminism.

Regretting that women "have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals" (*Sister* 115), Lorde advances, in an illuminating essay entitled "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," a politics of dialogue among women which systematizes female difference as the networking tool that brings us into union. This results in women's interdependency, which "is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative" (Lorde 123). By intimating how the strength of women lies in acknowledging the female other's difference as her own source of self-creation, Lorde anticipates women's achievement of what Rich terms woman-identification, which is a collective "source of energy, a potential springhead of female power" (Rich, "Compulsory" 657). In the interplay with the female other, women "sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different" (Lorde 123). Because, as Rich assays, "mothers and

daughters have always exchanged with each other—beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival—a knowledge that is subliminal" (*Born* 220), the female dialogue that assumes difference as connection with women and as a source of power finds its most suitable area of study in the struggling mother-daughter bond.

This paper has tested these ideas right in Moore's depiction of the mother-daughter tie: the contrasting qualities to each counterpart of the relationship indeed serve the protagonist the scaffolding to artistically build a powerful self-defined woman identity based on the mutual struggle and sharing with her female other. At the core of one of Moore's novels is her miserably married protagonist Berie, whose first-person narrative seems to subscribe to this understanding of women's conflicting reciprocity as the gist of essentially female creativity leading to woman's identity construction, tackling thus the workings of women's mutual bonds in the whole of Moore's fiction. In *Who Will Run The Frog Hospital?*, Berie reasonably reflects that "at the center of me is … a house in my heart so invaded with other people and their speech … that it gives me the impression I am simply a collection of them, that they all existed for themselves, but had inadvertently formed me, then vanished" (Moore, *Frog* 17). For one thing, the early confession of Berie's interdependency on the others' prompting dialogue to build her own sense of adulthood certainly aligns with the mothers' and daughters' relationship with one another in Moore's work. For another, the fact that this orchestrates an intimate narration revolving around the too vivid, intense memories of her own teenage years' female best friend is symptomatic of further portrayals of women's bonds in Moore's narratives.

Rightly, the essay has revealed the strained way in which mothers and daughters in Lorrie Moore's work entertain their gender-based struggles, which they share with their female others until arriving to their outcoming acts of narrative self-definition and identity

reconstruction, the protagonists becoming images of women-identified women. Yet, since this bond is sustained on a female-gender basis—Rich in fact expands the mother-daughter tie to the "intense female friendships based on a common life-pattern" (*Born* 235)—, the purview of research might be enlarged to encompass the dialogic interplay in female friendships, as it could provide enlightening views on Moore's exhaustive, complex portrayal of women as friends in her work. Especially when part of her novelistic production pioneered in national literature the thematization of female friendship and female adolescence at the center of the story, topics also present in some of her most acclaimed titles. The present paper, thus, has contributed to the prolific academic literature on Lorrie Moore's depiction of women's character in contemporary America by unravelling the distinct features of the mother-daughter tie and its corollaries in the narrative evolution of her fiction. Within this line of research, further investigation on the characterization of the telling bond between women friends and their interlocution may provide an accurate widening on the critic's engagement with Lorrie Moore's portrayal of female interaction in her fiction.

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