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Hearing the Past in the Silence of an
Empty House: Trauma, Loss and
Motherhood in Maggie Gee's *Lost
Children*

Autora

Esther Muñoz González

Directora

Dra. Susana Onega Jaén

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1-8
2. CHAPTER I: Alma's Infantile Trauma	9-20
3. CHAPTER II: Lost Children and Homelessness	21-32
4. CHAPTER III: Gwen and Alma as Lost Mothers	33-46
5. CHAPTER IV: Alma as a Middle-aged Woman	47-53
6. CHAPTER V: Childless Women: Sheilah and Verity	55-62
7. CONCLUSION	63-67
8. WORKS CITED	69-73

INTRODUCTION

Maggie Gee (Poole 1948) is a British novelist with a long professional career. She published her first book in 1981, a novel entitled *Dying, in Other Words*. At present, she is Vice-President of the Royal Society of Literature and Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Sheffield Hallam University. She was awarded an OBE for services to literature in 2012. Gee is a skilled writer with a self-conscious and highly experimental style which draws on into the Modernist tradition but is also steeped in contemporary political issues and social commentary. As her entry in the British Council Literature Directory puts it: “She combines domestic concerns [...] with societal and global issues such as homelessness, poverty, climate change and nuclear weapons.” (n. p.).

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

Dear Mum and Dad, I have to go away for a bit. I know you wouldn’t understand.

Don’t try to find me. Don’t worry about me. I’ve taken the money from my Post Office book. I’ll be all right. Give my love to Adam. I know you’ll be upset. I do love you. Zoe.

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

This incident blows up Alma's world and triggers her desperate quest to understand what had happened to cause Zoe's flight and, consequently, a search for her own identity. Her rage and sadness lead Alma to throw Paul from home and, with Adam already living on his own, the seemingly perfect family is broken. Alma struggles between incredulity, guilt and incomprehension in the course of a psychological journey into her own past looking for reasons to explain her behaviour and the feeling of being lost. The purpose of this essay is firstly to analyse Alma's search for her lost daughter from the perspective of Trauma Studies, with the aim of demonstrating that this search is in fact a psychological quest for the recovery of her lost childhood, voice and self, stolen by a traumatic event that can only be heard in an empty house, without the sort of distractions and obligations which traditionally burden women in patriarchal cultures. And secondly, to show how the novel delves into social and individual thematic issues—presented by means of binary oppositions—, so as to reach a complete overview of the worries, expectations and impositions that children and women— because of their potential to be mothers—are subject to in our western society, still imbued by patriarchal models and rules of behaviour.

Though the novel was first published in 1994, it is very influenced by Modernism in techniques, ideas and themes. The story is told by an external narrator that focalizes mainly through Alma's perspective and recounts her actions and thoughts. Only in three of the 42 chapters (17, 26 and 32), does the narrator shift the focus onto Paul's thoughts and actions and only once (Chapter 31) on Adam's. The fact that the narrator is external—or

“heterodiegetic” in Gérard Genette’s terminology (1980, 244-45)— and has access to the minds and thoughts of various characters, allows us to describe it as an authorial narrator with variable focalization. Psychologically, it would be consistent to identify this narrator with Maggie Gee and think of it as female. However narrators belong by definition in the fictional ontology of the text, not in the real world. Therefore, in order to avoid confusions between narrator and author, it seems necessary to deprive the narrator’s “functional notion of any human connotation” (Onega 276), by highlighting its textual nature and referring to it in the neuter. This degenderized treatment of the narrator, or, as Genette called it, “narrative instance” (1996, 172-74), was reinforced by Maggie Gee herself when she affirmed: “When I write, I feel both male and female” (Gee and Appignanesi, 172).

Yet another theoretical distinction that should be borne in mind for the analysis of the novel is the difference between narration and focalization. In *Lost Children*, the narrator focalizes most actions from Alma’s perspective, so much so that the narrator sometimes seems to identify with her and become Alma. This effect is produced by the change of the narration from the third to the first-person. In fact, however, this is only a realism-enhancing mechanism aimed at giving readers the impression that they are having direct access to the mind of the characters. The narrator enters Alma’s mind and renders her thoughts with hardly any intervention, through indirect interior monologue (Humphrey), a technique characterised precisely by this blurring of personal pronouns. On other, less frequent occasions, the narrator’s intervention is even totally omitted, as the technique shifts from indirect to direct interior monologue. As already pointed out, though Alma is the main focaliser

throughout the novel, on a few rare occasions the narrator focalises through Paul or Adam, using the same indirect interior monologue strategy: it enters their minds and transmits their thoughts with minimal intervention. Consider the following example:

PAUL SAT IN HIS OFFICE at ten-past seven, with the darkened school stretching out below him, for the clubs were all over, the athletes had vanished, even the cleaners had smoked their last fag, put away their polishers, all gone home. But he was still here. God in his heaven. Brooding above it in his box of light . . .

Except he didn't feel remotely god-like. What was he? Dogsboddy, social worker, policeman, accountant, hard man, soft man, beggar man, thief. Zoe used to adore that game. She could never get the names in the right order. Her favourite was 'sailor'; sailing way, she always wanted to go round the world. . . And maybe she is now. But not as we imagined. We told her we'd help her, after her degree, never doubting that she would do a degree. Little plans, little dreams. The obtuseness of parents.

I should know. I waste my life on bloody parents. (Gee 1995, 115)

In this quotation, the narrator uses several techniques to render the stream of consciousness of the character. It begins by presenting Paul from the outside, using omniscient description, then enters Paul's mind, without any warning to the readers, and reports Paul's thoughts through indirect interior monologue: "Except he didn't feel remotely god-like". Paul— alone in his

office after having been thrown out of home by Alma— misses her daughter, recalls her childhood and then reflects on the role played by him in her daughter's unrest. All the thoughts are expressed in the present tense, exactly as Paul is supposed to be thinking them, but we know that they are mediated by the narrator because they are reported in the third person. Then, in the last sentence, the distance between narrator and character disappears, as the narration moves from the third to the first person, and so from indirect interior monologue to direct interior monologue, a technique in which the concatenation of thoughts or association of ideas imitates the workings of the mind of the character at the moment of ideation: "I should know". These narrative strategies facilitate the expression of the character's emotions and innermost thoughts and, consequently, the creation of reader empathy. Paul feels partially responsible for her daughter's flight and the readers can share Paul's feelings and perspective due to this sensation of immersion in his subjectivity.

These strategies are often accompanied by a lack of punctuation, ellipses, anacolutha expressed by means of suspension points, and the use of italics to indicate in some cases the change of diegetic level from the narrator's to that of the character. This is the case especially when the narrator reports Paul's or Adam's train of thoughts, as in the following example: "Now no one seemed to want to touch him [Paul] [...]. Whenever I wanted to, she let me. —*But did she love me, or did she just pretend?*" (Gee 1995, 123, italics in the original). Paul's reminiscences of his marital sex life are focalised from the character's perspective but reported first in the third and then in the first person by the external narrator thus giving the illusion that

the narrator is “present[ing] unspoken materials as if it were directly from the consciousness of [Paul’s] character” (Humphrey 29). Paul’s thought: “Whenever I wanted to, she let me” indicates the “complete or near disappearance of the author from the page” (Humphrey 25). This move from indirect to direct interior monologue is further complicated by the fact that the following sentence is printed in italics, a recourse that appears several times in the novel and which may be interpreted as indication that, in this case, Paul is maintaining a dialogue between his ego and his internal other (Freud) “—*But did she love me, or did she just pretend?*”.

Most frequently Maggie Gee uses italics to indicate Alma’s self-soliloquising, split self, as in the following example: “She told herself sternly. Why am I so horribly critical? *But why can’t he see I don’t want him to stay?*” (Gee 1995, 166-7, italics in the original). This quotation is very illustrative of the way in which the narrator grants readers access to the internal soliloquies between the two facets of Alma’s split self. Adam, her son, is visiting her and she cannot avoid being critical and even nasty with him. One part of Alma feels ashamed of her disruptive behaviour, while at the same time, her angry inner self still justifies her coldness. First the third-person narrator alerts the readers that it is entering Alma’s mind while she is talking to herself: “She told herself,” and then tense and person change to the present and the first person. The use of italics helps readers realise that what is being recorded is Alma’s dialogue with her internal other. Her rational and educated side: “Why am I so horribly critical?” and her angry “friend. The other Alma” (110): “*But why can’t he see I don’t want him to stay?*”. All these devices enhance the

impression of fluidity of the stream of thoughts, either of Paul, Adam or Alma, as can be seen in the following quotation:

And the children, she [Alma] thought. Up there on their own. With men liken him, so obviously lonely. It doesn't bear thinking about, does it? So we don't think about them, and they go on suffering . . . Unless it's true that their innocence protects them. That incomprehension is a kind of wall.

That's what I need, incomprehension. [...] I'm one of the available, the walking wounded. Especially if they're tender. Especially if they're warm . . .

As if she had been born to look after them.

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

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

And I become nothing. I lose myself . . . (Gee 1995, 111)

In this quotation, the narrator alerts the readers that it is entering Alma's mind: "she thought," and then reports her association of ideas, in this case, triggered by the disquiet provoked in her by the appearance in the swimming pool of the lonely man she mentions in the first line. What follows is the concatenation of Alma's free association of ideas as she is making them, from the potential damage the lonely man could do to the children, without anybody paying attention— "Up there on their own. With men liken him, so obviously lonely. It does bear thinking about, does it"?— to her own relation

to the situation that has triggered her train of thoughts: “Unless it’s true that their innocence protects them. That incomprehension is a kind of wall. / That’s what I need, incomprehension. [...] I’m one of the available, the walking wounded.” So Alma feels unprotected, an available victim, an adult without the innocence which could guard her from potential aggressors. Then, the narration changes again to the third person and to indirect interior monologue —“As she had been born to look after them”—, to finally return to the first person, in only a few lines: “*And I become nothing.*” The use of italics marks the irruption of her inner voice claiming to be heard, reminding her that something wrong happened in her past.

Even if, as mentioned above, the narrative techniques are mainly intended to render Alma’s thoughts and feelings, there are other women in the novel essential to reach an almost complete panorama of western women’s worries and situations. This is why I will also examine Gwen, Eileen, Zoe, Verity and Sheilah and even though the narrator does not grant access to their thoughts, they can be known through the dialogues and Alma’s reflexions.

CHAPTER I: Alma's Infantile Trauma

In her review, Michele Roberts defines *Lost Children* as “the most elegiac of Maggie Gee’s novels to date,” and she describes Alma as “a heroine who is irritating and not very likeable” (n. p.). Another reviewer, Angela Neustatter considers that Alma’s crisis and contradictions are typical of those “suffered by many middle-aged women” (n. p.). Even though both reviewers are right in their characterisation of Alma, they ignore the primary reason for her breakdown, the departure of her teenage daughter being only the second psychic shock that brings to the surface a forcefully repressed earlier one. As the novel progresses, Zoe’s disappearance becomes almost a background preoccupation for Alma, because, as Karin von Harman rightly argues, “motherhood is not the main culprit of her [Alma’s] lack of secure ego boundaries” (148). This interpretation of the true subject matter of the novel — Alma’s repressed childhood trauma— was reinforced by Maggie Gee herself when she acknowledged a special interest in the effects of repressed memories: “I have always been very attracted to the psychoanalytic concept of ‘the return of the repressed’, because it seems to me eminently true of my own life” (2012, 271).

Alma’s traumatised condition is expressed in her constant remarks about her split self, in sentences such as: “underneath, another voice whispered, nibbled: I like to be selfish, but I don’t know how” (Gee 1995, 9). The significant discrepancy between Alma’s egotistic inner self and the self-

sacrificing persona she perceives as external to her is present from the first pages of the novel and exists before Zoe's flight. But it is only when her preferred child goes away that Alma's inner voice gains strength and force. Without the presence of the only object of her love and concern in the last 16 years, Alma is for the first time totally aware of the existence of an inner disconformity with her life, and she becomes ready to acknowledge her anger and the inner gap—between what she consciously recalls from her childhood and what really happened—that has existed all through her life. This realisation triggers in Alma a turning inward and a quest for the truth in her past: "Help me! Help me!" Alma screamed to no one, turned away from Paul, turned inward, sobbing." (8).

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

Traumatic experience produces a physiological overload that the brain and body are unable to manage adequately, preventing us from continuing to function normally. Our primary defense to cope with this physiological overload is a mechanism called 'dissociation' [...] a

primary response to traumatic experience [...]. It allows us to transcend, to escape from, the constraints of reality and in doing so, it allows us to tolerate irreconcilable conflicts. (200-01)

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

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

The traumatic nightmare, undistorted by repression or unconscious wish, seems to point directly to an event, and yet, as Freud suggests, it occupies a space to which willed access is denied. Indeed, the vivid and precise return of the event appears, as modern researchers point

out, to be accompanied by an amnesia for the past, a fact striking enough to be referred to by several major writers as a paradox (152)

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

Owen was ‘Father’ to distinguish him from Daddy, Alma’s real father, Jack. She was only four when Daddy died. The older she got, the more she longed to remember him. But all she could recall was a warm dark tenderness, a yielding, something absolute and mysterious [...]. The years with Daddy were the Golden Age. *Gwen had told her so, and Alma believed it* [...] ‘Jack doted on you, Alma. *Worshipped little*

girls. Loved them to death. And you—you would have died for him. You would have done anything for my Jack’. (Gee 1995, 33, emphasis added)

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

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

mother did not help and believe her—a very usual reaction around and within the family circle of victims—aggravated her state. In Sandra L. Bloom's words:

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

Gwen had always succeeded in avoiding recognising and condemning her first husband's unacceptable behaviour. She had always made Alma feel guilty of being selfish and disobedient. Thus, she grew up learning to put the other's needs always first: "There was something wrong with her [Alma]. She couldn't say No" (Gee 1995, 63). And now in the narrative present, when Alma is 50 years old and her daughter has left, she wants to stop trying to please her mother and speak to her. As she reflects: "I shall make her give back whatever was lost, I shall make them give up what was taken from me. I could go back and find it. Be whole again" (36). At this stage, Alma is aware of her self-fragmentation and wants to know the whole story of her childhood: "*When did I lose my innocence? Who did the thing that was done to me?*" (111, italics in the original). She needs her mother as an empathic listener, the "witnessing 'other' that confirms the reality of the traumatic event." (Laub and Podell 1993).

But Alma's dreams point to the shocking possibility that Gwen not only did not believe her but that she was fully aware of the situation, acted as a passive accomplice to her husband and was, therefore, a co-perpetrator:

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

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

If she is to heal the wound, Alma needs to construct the complete narrative of her childhood that would allow her to be the owner of her story. As Laub and Podell explain, "when a person is subjected to a trauma the only way he can maintain a connection between self and internal other is by exercising an inner capability to shape and order the coercive 'facts' that confront him" (1998). Even now that Alma is a middle-aged woman she fears that her boss, Mr Crowther, will not believe her and take her side when she is almost assaulted

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

Alma keeps investigating, trying to reconstruct and fill in the gaps in the traumatic memories of her childhood, and this is why she travels to Wales in order to visit her aunt, Eileen, and her mother, Gwen. It is her aunt who starts demolishing the ideal image that Alma's mother had built of Daddy. Eileen did not like him, he was an alcoholic and a womaniser and Gwen would probably have been better without him (231-32). But when Alma tries to find out her mother's version, she still staunchly defends Daddy's honesty, even though, as Alma reflects, her words "sounded as though she meant the opposite." (235). Alma eventually realises that Gwen is unable to accept the harsh truth about Daddy, that the truth would "tear her in two" (236). And she also realises that she will never get any information from her mother. For years, Gwen had managed to live in an idealised past and if she is woken up from her dream by force, she will be permanently damaged. When Alma tries to talk with her mother of the past, her reaction is very demonstrative of her present fragility: "Gwen clutched at herself, a ball of frail bones, unimaginably small, her face animal, contorted, braying out terrible bursts of harsh tears which drew from Alma a horrified pity." (236). Alma chooses to protect her elderly and lonely

mother from the traumatic memories she is so eager to recover, even though she is still unable to love her unconditionally. And she realises that she shall always need Gwen, “because she contains my past” (239).

Initially, Alma believed that Gwen was pretending her amnesia, but as aunt Eileen explains to her: “People get old, and they do forget. Sometimes they have to forget, to get by. They get too old to do the work of remembering.” (231). Whereas for Gwen, traumatic dissociation is the only way to survive, Alma needs to recuperate her repressed and dissociated memories in order to work through her trauma. Both reactions are understandable according to Henry Krystal because, as he argues, “in old age [...] our past lies unfolded before us, and the question is, what should be done with it? The answer is that it must be accepted or one must keep waging an internal war against the ghosts of one’s past” (78). Gwen has accepted her past but “avoiding to talk about the events” (Krystal 81). It seems that the only way she is able to deal with the past is by consciously forgetting her permissiveness in her daughter’s abuse or even as if nothing had happened. Now in her old age, she is only able to accept one reality, her idyllic version of the past.

But it is not only about Gwen’s happiness and the past that Alma feels guilty. She has had time to reflect on her own role as a mother. Openly, she is able to recognise her possible influence on Zoe’s decision to leave home: “it’s my punishment [...]. I must have interfered too much” (Gee 1995, 108), but once and again she lies to herself about the way she treats her son, Adam. Everybody around Alma repeatedly calls her attention to the fact that she still has a son who needs her love and, although she tries “to feel tenderness instead of irritation” (166), there is something in her son that provokes her absolute

rejection. This something is his physical appearance, “his generous red lips [...] they reminded her of someone—not Paul’s lips, not my lips, lips she did not entirely like” (166). Adam is handsome, very tall and blond, he looks very much like Alma’s Daddy and, although Alma is unable to remember her childhood suffering, her unconscious prevents her from feeling any tenderness and love for her son, even though she tries. She feels guilty about mistreating her own son, but soothes her remorse by telling herself once and again that Adam is an adult and does not need her, that he is well. Only when Alma faces the fact that her son has tried to commit suicide does she start to behave as a loving mother: “‘I’m sorry, Adam,’ she whispered, touching him, touching his hand which lay spread out, open, ready to receive whatever she would give. ‘I’m really sorry’—but that wasn’t it, she realized as she tiptoed away, and she turned and said, slightly louder, ‘I love you’” (312).

In her first counselling therapy session with Paul, Alma bitterly complains that her voice had never been heard and that she “used to feel I hadn’t got a face [...]. I felt I didn’t exist” (261). She recounts an occasion when Father, Gwen’s second husband, mistreated her and the word “abuse” (262) runs on out of her mouth. For the first time in her life, Alma considers the possibility of having been harassed by Daddy, her biological father. But it is only when the adult Alma somehow relives a similar experience with a handsome, blond and tall man who calls her “a sweet little girl” (305) in the middle of a sexual encounter, that she is able to recover the ownership of her whole self. She ferociously exerts her right to say “No” and mend the past through the present. In the past, when Alma was abused, she was only four years old, she had no real possibility of defending herself and, consequently,

her reaction was to repress the emotions provoked by the awful experience, and dissociate the knowledge of it. As Sandra L. Bloom points out,

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

When the attempt at sexual harassment is repeated in the present, Alma is an adult and takes control of the situation. Once she acknowledges her presence within it, she can decide. She hears her inner self telling her that she is the owner of her living self and body, not a submissive object. As she reflects: “*my body, mine, my living self*, it did have walls, it was complete” (Gee 1995, 307, italics in the original). Yet, guided by the model of behaviour she has followed all her life, she instinctively says “I’m sorry” (307) when the blond man reacts angrily to her rejection. But her inner voice firmly pushes her to assume the ownership of her body and mind: “*But you mustn’t say sorry*” (307), and Alma says in her own voice: “I don’t want to do this” (307). She respects and defends her body’s desires and expels the bad memories from her: “It had pushed him away. It [her body] had finally spoken” (308). Her body reminisces past events or situations during which it could not speak. With the recovery of her memories she recovers her will and wholeness of body and mind. Now that she recalls the story of her childhood, she can overcome her trauma and can

love her son, because as her inner voice reflects, if “*I can love him, I can break the pattern.*” (315, italics in the original). And she understands at last that “[t]hat was the secret. *Love allows . . . love allows us to be ourselves.*” (315, italics in the original). As the combination of italics and roman type suggests, it is at this point, when Alma realises the crucial importance of love, that her self-fragmentation comes to an end. Only by loving her son as such, instead of seeing him as a living replica of her Daddy, will she be able to assume the past and live towards the future.

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

CHAPTER II: Lost Children and Homelessness

Lost Children, as Mine Özyurt Kiliç argues, seems in its title an allusion to the poems about lost children (89) which appear in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789). As this allusion suggests, the novel draws from the Romantic tradition in its consideration of children as closer to nature and more insightful than adults because "a child has not yet rationalized and assimilated the workings of society the way and adult has" (Metz n. p.). Alma herself was a lost child. The loss of her innocence and eventual recovery of memories parallels the dynamics in the sequence of Blake's "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found" with the difference that Alma's quest is aimed at the healing of her psychological trauma.¹ But in *Lost Children* every human being is a lost child, both in the metaphorical and the literal sense of the world. There are "millions of them [lost children]. The uncountable lost ones" (Gee 1995, 7). Zoe, Alma's missing daughter, is the most literal example of the disappearance of a child in the novel, but it is my contention that her flight from home is only the physical outcome of a previous loss, and that this loss is representative of that experimented by many middle-class children who are denied a proper childhood for the sake of being introduced into an extremely competitive society. These children live in a society that does not offer the same opportunities to the children of the lower classes

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

allowing them to be unprotected and neglected, a society that classifies its citizens into suitable or unsuitable for success from their birth. It is the same unjust society that pretends to be blind when some of its citizens lose their way and become homeless.

Alma belongs to the affluent middle class. She has a university degree (55), is married to a man who earns a good salary and is the owner of a house with high monetary value. Alma has a high sense of class consciousness as she has been trained from her youth to easily distinguish the members of the lower classes from the well-to-do ones. Her class awareness can be appreciated, for instance, the first time she talks on the phone with Paul's landlady: "The woman sounded young, middling young, lower middle-class trying not to be. We're trained from birth, she thought, to make these farcical, insane distinctions" (87). In spite of recognising the injustice of these preconceived class-biased ideas and of being aware that certain assumptions of superiority were introduced in her own education, Alma aims to prepare her daughter Zoe to be a winner in the social arena of the well-to-do society. As Michèle Roberts discerningly explains in her review of the novel, Alma, "wants Zoe to be the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the perfect all-rounder" (n. p.). She has dedicated all her efforts, time and energies to training Zoe "for the race of life" (Gee 1995, 17), from her early childhood. This is why she teaches her to float as a previous step for the swimming lessons in the Sports Complex. This shared experience is recalled by Zoe as her "favourite thing" (15), when she is already a teenager. Alma compares the heated, balmy water of the swimming-pool, to "the waters of the womb" (14), and she remembers how "very happy" they were "floating together, side by

side on the amniotic water” (15) in what may be described as a clear reinforcement of the bond between mother and daughter, a mirror experience of the intimate connection they shared during the pregnancy, when they were actually physically linked. But it is Alma who, without realising it, starts to break this umbilical connection, when she forces Zoe to enter the competitive world of the post-capitalist society. Schedules, activities and goals are determined by the aim of fitting successfully into a society that is very demanding with its citizens, even with the children, often at the cost of depriving them of the enjoyment of things done only for pleasure.

Zoe is only five years old and her life becomes “very busy, suddenly” (16), when she engages in a sport activity that Alma and the other mothers see as a competition between their offspring, “trying to restrain themselves from shouting instructions, discussing avidly among themselves the little derelictions of the teachers [...] trying not to sound too competitive” (17). In this description of the mothers’ behaviour, the narrator sharply points out the hypocrisy of the mothers who appear to be absolutely determined to transform their children into winners while acting as if they did not care. But in fact they do care. Alma, like the other mothers in the Sports Complex, has embraced a type of motherhood Andrea O’Reilly calls “intensive mothering.” This type of mother becomes almost the only person responsible for the care of the children, invests “lavishing copious amounts of time, energy and material resources on the child,” and “regards mothering as more important than her paid work” (O’Reilly 5). Furthermore, for 16 years, Zoe, “the only thing I [Alma] cared about” (Gee 1995, 25), has been for her a personal project to

develop. Alma was absolutely confident of her daughter's potential skills and talents and the need to support and drive her towards social and educational success. Alma's aspirations for her daughter are totally predictable and understandable in our extremely competitive society. As Professor Kathryn R. Wentzel, who is an expert in Human Development at the University of Maryland, explains, the theories developed by parents about how their children's intelligence can be changed or controlled, "are likely to be related to the academic and intellectual goals they set for their children." (22).

Alma, like many other middle-class "intensive" mothers, feels that she is the only person responsible for Zoe's education and in charge of her intellectual, artistic and sportive stimulation. Paul—who is moved to a better salary scale after their early years of marriage— maintains an adequate standard of living and becomes the sole breadwinner since Alma has renounced her professional ambitions and "decided she could spend more time with Zoe" (Gee 1995, 14). Zoe is expected to have an outstanding performance in every field. Moreover, Zoe's seeming failures—when she abandons her swimming and music lessons and, above all, home—are lived by Alma as her personal defeats. The only professional ambitions Alma has are intended for Zoe. Thus, Alma becomes what Fiona Joy Green calls the "ideal" mother:

She is a heterosexual woman who stays at home with her children while her husband (the father of their children) works in the labor force to support them financially. Because of her "innate" ability to parent and her "unconditional love" for her husband and children,

the idealized mother selflessly adopts their wants, needs, and happiness as her own. Her willingness to participate in her children's schooling or in community activities is an extension of her maternal love. (127)

Although she does not quite fulfil this ideal mother role to Adam — who is the living reminder of her traumatic past— Alma lives a very committed motherhood in the case of Zoe, with whom she has a true and unproblematic —at least for Alma— emotional connection. This mother/daughter bond has been appropriately understood by Michèle Roberts as a recreation of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone (n. p.). Following the same line of thought, Karin von Harman has stated that, “though Demeter is never mentioned in Gee’s *Lost Children*, the novel is clearly a take on the ancient story” (147). This critic underlines the relevance that the cycle of seasons is given in the novel, since Zoe’s disappearance occurs in Autumn and she returns home in midwinter, a seasonal time which “coincides with a regeneration of nature” (147). Alma also links Zoe’s physical appearance with the harvest and thus with nature when she describes her: “Her hair in those days was golden brown, harvest gold, thickly plaited, the generous gold of plaited bread” (Gee 1995, 24). However, von Harman questionably goes on to say that, while in the myth Demeter’s “grief is not so much in having lost ‘her baby’ [...] as in having lost her companion” (147), what we have in the novel is a mother entertaining “maternal desires to find in the daughter a companion or an equal” (147). According to von Harman,

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

Furthermore, Alma’s vision of life is quite different from Zoe’s. Alma imposes on her a type of education based on competitiveness and practical results that forces Zoe from childhood to fight in order to do things her own way:

When Zoe was twelve, she gave up her swimming lessons.

‘But Zoe, you’re brilliant. You’re competition standard. Every single teacher has said the same thing.’

‘I know. I’m fine. I don’t need more lessons [...]

‘I don’t want to get anywhere. I just want to enjoy it. I enjoy swimming. Just — *being* in the water. (Gee 1995, 21, emphasis in the original)

Zoe’s strong will and clear ideas contrast with her mother’s and portrays her as an unambitious girl in terms of competitiveness, more connected with the pleasant side of life and nature: “just— *being*” (21). To be totally aware of her existence inside the warm water is enough reward for her. Zoe does not give up easily and strongly resists Alma’s attempts to turn her into a successful girl according to the standards of our post-industrial society. The Sports Complex functions as a kind of microcosm of this society, reflecting the evils of part of British society and, by extension, of post-industrial societies in general. One day, when she was waiting for Zoe at the Sports Complex, Alma suddenly noticed the presence of many children who were there daily without a parent:

She realized there were dozens of them. Seven- or eight-year-olds. Sixes or sevens. Even five-year-olds, clutching the hands of bigger brothers or sisters, bigger, but nevertheless much too small to be there on their own. But there was no one with them. (18)

These are children who watch fascinated how other children are cared for by their mothers. These mothers do not notice them because they are absorbed

in the care of their offspring and in “the round of activities that middle-class parenthood demanded” (19). Zoe, like other middle-class children, has the privilege of being “the nurtured baby, the nourished baby” (21). By contrast, these unaccompanied children are starving not only for food but also for attention and love and, what is worse, their innocence is set in danger by the lack of adults’ protection. According to Kiliç, a critic who devotes great attention to the social aspects of the novel, Maggie Gee is “critical of precarious modern living conditions that do not support a life with children” (90) and with a state of things where children are the victims (20-21). The poorest ones in real life, like the unaccompanied children in the swimming pool, are neglected and deprived of the most elementary rights, beginning with parental care. They suffer the consequences of belonging to broken families and homes where sometimes they are unwanted and ill-treated. As can be deduced from the conversations between Alma and some of them (Gee 1995, 20-22), these children belong to the most unprivileged social strata. On some occasions, they are descendants of immigrants with ill-paid or extenuating jobs that force them to be absent from home too many hours. Very often they are single parents and they do not have other members of the family to help them in the care of the children. Alma pities them, but the irony of the situation is that she does not realise the condition of victims of her own children. On the one hand, Zoe, like the other middle-class children, suffers the enormous pressure of being the only focus of Alma’s attention and ambition and, on the other, Adam, her son, is as abandoned by her as the children at the Sports Complex. Ironically, in her opinion, Adam is “too old to need a parent” (16), but Alma had neglected him from the day of his birth.

If the novel is “a eulogy of childhood” (Kiliç 90), it is also a critique of all the factors in our society that deprive children of their most elemental rights and make them victims of our contemporary times. In this sense, the fact that Alma’s husband, Paul, is an education professional is significant. Through him, Gee points an accusing finger at parents as those immediately responsible for the children’s welfare, but also at the institutional neglect of children and at budgetary cuts in education. As Paul reflects:

But these kids will grow up. These kids will come back [...]. They’ll come looking for someone to make good what they’ve lost. They’ll know they’ve been cheated. They’ll want their revenge. When these politicians are old and weak, the kids they’ve short-changed will be big and tough. [...] They’ll do to the weak what was done to them when they were helpless, when they were weak. They’ll find the old. It won’t be hard. They’ll find their own children; even easier. They will make them pay for every penny they lost. They will hand it on, what was done to them. (Gee 1995, 194)

This quotation is a good example of the social commitment of the novel as it problematizes politicians who do not invest in improving children’s education, which is the only way to improve the future. Paul is critical with policies that take advantage of the weakest part of society, the “lost children” who in the future will take their revenge and treat with the same neglect and lovelessness the weak and old, including the politicians

themselves. Without investment in education, the vicious circle will never be broken, and our society will remain in a permanent state of ethical and communal decadence with “business and money making” (Kiliç, 91) as the only important goals.

There are other parts or strata of society as abandoned as the children in the swimming pool, and they are the homeless people affected by governmental housing policies. Alma only becomes aware of their existence when she starts working at Portico and Sheen and observes them gathered around her office. Like many other middle-class individuals, Alma does not see the homeless as normal people with problems but as people who were “encroaching on the places where *normal* people lived” (Gee 1995, 130, emphasis added). Only when she considers the idea that her beloved Zoe could be living on the streets, does she begin to understand them as “normal” human beings, but even then, she is “glad to stop thinking about the homeless” (124). Her change of perspective ironically brings to the fore the hypocrisy of the middle class pretending that the homeless do not exist, being blind to their presence on the streets, waiting for their disappearance. Through Zoe, the novel insists on the facility with which the boundary between homelessness and middle-class security and affluence can be crossed. After leaving her home and becoming homeless, Zoe explains to her brother Adam how it is to be a vagrant and how these people really are:

‘Well that’s another thing you don’t understand. You look at people like them — people like *me* — you think homeless people are different. Because they look dirty, or a few of them are drunk — and

everyone notices they ones who are drunk —' [...]. 'They're *not* different.' [...] 'Most of them are intelligent people. They're *normal* people, like you and me. They're not frightening. You just think they are. Well a few of them are mad, but mostly — it's just that something *happened* to them. Something very bad. Or too many small things. And they fell through the net . . . [...] 'You could be homeless. *I've* been homeless.'(Gee 247-48, italics in the original)

Through Zoe's speech the critical message becomes very clear: under determined circumstances any citizen can be driven to homelessness, and even more so when the governmental social policies do not support the weakest.

In summary, one important thematic element of the novel is the denunciation of the prejudices of the dominant members of a loveless and money-making oriented society against the victims, when it is mainly the hypocrisy, selflessness and disinterest of society and its power structures that are to blame for those millions of lost children and vagrants. Some of them, like Zoe, are lost because of the excess of expectations and demands placed on them: they are not allowed to live their childhood in contact with nature and they are incorporated from early childhood into the dynamics of the competitive society. Middle-class parents, obsessed with social success and profit, forget that children have the right not only to be educated but, much more importantly, to be loved and taken care of. Children need to be heard and accompanied during the process of growing up. In her treatment of Zoe,

Alma is representative of those parents who do not respect their natural inclinations and their right to be only children and have time to play. By contrast, Alma's treatment of Adam sets the pattern for those parents who deprive their children of their most elemental rights, deny them the fulfilment of their needs and prevent them from developing their natural skills through neglect, lack of familiar support. To these may be added, the children of the lower social classes, like the swimming-pool children, who suffer the double neglect of their parents and of a government that does not invest enough in their education. Finally, the homeless people Alma encounters outside her office stand for the future of some of these lost children. The novel defends that homeless people are not aliens from the rest of society; that their situation is the consequence of the lack of support by the rest of society and that homelessness is a possible ending for whoever has severe economic and personal problems. The ethical message the novel sends is that none of the children should be lost if we want to prevent them from becoming lost adults, and that it is our responsibility to care for and love them so as to prevent their derailment.

CHAPTER III: Gwen and Alma as Lost Mothers

From a mother's perspective, the end of childhood signifies losing a child, and also somehow ceasing being a mother, that is, the end of childhood implies the apparition of lost mothers. Women who were mothers enter a new phase in their lives with the growing up of their offspring in which they gain freedom and the possibility of devoting more time to themselves. If they envision the new situation from a positive perspective, women can be "at least as effective, sensual and vital as they were in earlier decades, and possibly more so with children out of the way and all the time in the world to devote to working hard and having fun." (Neustatter, n. p.). But considered on the negative side, it is also the end of one stage in which women lose fertility and harbour fears such as losing their sexual desire and attractiveness, in short, their youth. The case of Alma is even worse since she uses motherhood not only as her only goal in life but also as a way to hide the problems and traumas she is dragging on from her childhood and are impeding her own realisation and happiness. Each step in the development of Zoe is lived by Alma as another loss to add to the list, this is why she does not want her children to grow up. She is so exclusively dedicated to motherhood that she fears the void that will appear when she is no longer needed. Even years before Zoe's flight, when she was still a child, Alma was already worrying about her children growing up and leaving home and the temporal quality of the role she had chosen for her realisation in life:

—Soon they’ll have gone, and I shan’t be a mother. I’ll be left with my own abortive little life, I’ll have to think, I’ll have to make changes . . . I’m not ready, yet. I’m not ready to move on. I want to stay with the mothers and babies. (Gee 1995, 22)

Alma’s identity has been split for most of her adult life and her only certainty and source of security is that she is Zoe’s mother. Before Zoe’s flight, Alma lived postponing life without noticing it, in a seemingly eternal present. She lived trying not to look into the past and avoiding to look into the future. This is why, when Zoe went away “time broke down” (13). It is then that Alma is forced not only to reconstruct her past —the healing of her infantile trauma— but also to meditate about her present that has become futile and predicts a rather hopeless future, without plans and goals once Zoe is gone.

Without the presence of her daughter and the invisibility Alma has enforced on Adam, she is no longer a mother. It is this change in the perception of herself that makes her wish to reconsider her own condition as a daughter. Though apparently, the aim behind this wish is to analyse and compare her own model of maternity to that of her mother, in fact, Alma’s attempt to recover the memories of her childhood marks the starting point for the healing of her trauma. Alma had always been very critical with Gwen, to the point that when she was a teenager “she half-despised her mother” (32). She did not understand the tiredness that Gwen expressed when she only had to take care of her, an only child. Alma felt neglected and reproached her mother for her selfish behaviour towards her in contrast to her total abnegation and dedication to both her husbands. Gwen, in turn, encouraged Alma to behave according to her

expected model of dutiful daughter by calling her “an angel” when she was good and giving her rewards (33). But, on the whole, Alma’s relationship with her mother was not a happy one; she felt that “her love was the love of a debtor. She never gave enough” (32). Gwen “never had a job, in deference to her husbands” (37), her main role and expectation in life was to be the perfect wife. This was much more important for her than being the perfect mother. Gwen was first of all a wife and then a mother since she subordinated Alma’s welfare to her husbands’ happiness. She embodies an extremely patriarchal model of woman who takes for granted and sees as normal that any woman, even her daughter, should be dedicated to men’s happiness and comfortability. Very worried about her saving of face, Gwen’s main aim was to keep up an appearance of perfect happiness and decorum even if it implied masking reality. Gwen’s double standard of morality and her favouring of appearances over reality are the reasons why her home is remembered by Alma as a dark place and “sometimes a torment” (31), a place where she did not feel safe. In spite of living in “the sort of street that said life was good” (68), Alma bitterly recalls how inside the identical box-like houses “there could be mayhem, beatings, murders, quiet abuse . . . Things never made known, things that won’t be remembered. Lost children. Lost people.” (68). This remark suggests that the binary inside/outside opposition can function contrary to expectations, that dark secrets can be kept inside houses whereas outside one can find freedom and one’s own life path, as Zoe tries to do. Alma did not feel safe at home during her childhood, but neither did Zoe, as her home became too constraining, a place where she could not make her own decisions.

As a child, Alma was frequently sent away to Aunt Eileen's place. She inferred that it was because her mother "couldn't cope" (37) with her caring, another element that made her feel almost rejected. At the same time, however, Alma had in Eileen a totally opposed model of woman to compare and contrast with her mother. In the long run, Eileen becomes for Alma an alternative mother and possible source of inspiration and example of a totally different life style. While Alma perceives her real home as a dark place, Eileen lives literally surrounded by bright colours and uses them for her clothes, she lives in contact with nature, alone and free. For Alma, Eileen is the embodiment of her best remembrances from her childhood, even more so since "she didn't have that many happy memories" (75). Young Alma saw Eileen as a figure almost out of time, extemporal, as she was unable to decide whether her aunt was a girl or a grown up woman. Childless and single but with occasional relationships with men, Eileen is the paired opposite of her sister Gwen. As Alma reflects: "They were like two halves of the same person. (Or mirror-images? Good and bad . . . Alma's ideal mother, and the one she had.)" (237). With Eileen, Alma feels loved, protected, welcomed and, what is most important, heard. As is shown by Alma's relationship with her mother, and of herself with her own children as well as with her husband, the lack of communication is a main source of unhappiness and conflict between different family generations and between human beings in general. Within the sphere of the family, many scholars, especially feminist ones such as Andrea O'Reilly, underline the crucial role that mothers' attitude have in the psychological development of the female child. As O'Reilly states, a "mother-daughter connection gives rise to the daughter's empowerment if and only if the mother with whom the daughter is identifying

is herself empowered” (164). Gwen exerts her power exclusively on Alma, because she lives totally subjugated to her husbands and concerned with society’s opinion, so she cannot help Alma to be a strong and empowered woman. The question is: Who is Alma’s chosen model of mother? As Hélène Cixous explains, there is inside each woman the possibility of supporting and helping other women, and this role is not exclusive of the biological mother:

There always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other—in particular, the other woman [...]. “What about she who is the hysterical offspring of a bad mother?” Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to Woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was “born” to her [...]. In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes. (2045)

Alma, paradoxically and in spite of harbouring deep feelings of resentment against Gwen, eventually and maybe unconsciously —because she has interiorised her mother’s expectations— choses to be like her mother, with the crucial difference that she does not place her husband’s needs before her children’s. Alma first, “had become the perfect daughter, a transformation she

could never quite believe” (Gee 1995, 35) and, later on, the intensive mother who expects and requires so much from her children that even Gwen —now a venerable old lady who has thrown off the yoke of years of husbands’ domination— reproaches Alma the extremity of her demands: “Alma, you’re always on at those children. Leave them alone, dear. Let them have their head” (35). Alma cannot believe that her ancient mother could behave with her grandchildren as the perfect and understanding mother she always dreamt of having. Her feelings of disbelief and amazement before this, for her, unknown type of mother make her even question her own childhood reminiscences: “Was it possible she misremembered everything?” (36). It seems that the widow Gwen, who does no longer need to attend to any man’s desires is now liberated from the oppressions and exigencies of patriarchy and is able at last to concentrate her attention and good feelings on her offspring. As Cixous claims:

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. (2041)

The change Gwen has experienced once she is liberated from her self-imposed duties as a patriarchal mother and wife is not at all surprising. With her grandchildren, she has moved from “motherhood” to “mothering” in O’Reilly’s definition of the terms. O’Reilly defines motherhood as the mother/children relationship established by repressive patriarchal institutions. By contrast, mothering is a totally different relationship in which sisterhood

and the connection with nature are primordial and liberating for women. (4). Until Zoe's flight, Alma had been an abnegated and subservient wife, friend and neighbour —following Gwen's patriarchal model of motherhood —never saying “no” to the others' needs, feeling like a “victimised domestic saint” that is desperate “to be nice in a conventionally feminine way” (Roberts, n. p.). But once she starts to be conscious that she has interiorised her mother's ideas, Alma acknowledges her failure and decides to learn from her mistakes:

we spend most of our lives groping after another version of our first family. Trying to find a less threatening father, trying to find a listening mother. Trying to find a less cruel space where the children we were could live again. [...]. And if at last that was understood [...] — I should be forgiven by my own children.

— Yet she still didn't know what they had to forgive. (Gee 1995, 52-53)

In order to assume her errors and understand why her daughter has escaped from her, she still needs to assume her own role as a daughter, understand her childhood and accomplish her psychological journey for maturation and completeness. As Gee herself claimed in an interview: “You can't understand anything unless you have tried to understand your childhood” (in Neustatter n. p.).

Alma took full responsibility for Zoe's education, taking pride of her achievements, which were not uncommon, and was totally taken aback by her sudden disappearance. Surprisingly, she held Paul solely responsible for it and

also for the enormous sense of failure that this supposed for Alma. When she comments with her friend Verity the circumstances that made her throw Paul out of home, Alma's feelings of anger against her husband are very clear: "I bloody blame him,' [...] She could show it with Verity; anger was allowed [...]. . . *I blame him for bloody everything. I blame him because we had her in the first place.*" (46-47, italics in the original). As her self-directed comment: "She could show it with Verity" makes clear, adult Alma partly follows her mother's teachings about being "attuned to the feelings of others" (33), and this obviously implies that she should never demonstrate anger. In the author's words: "Women are trained too well to adapt to other people, to be interested only in others, to say only what we think they want to hear" (Gee and Appignanesi 177). It is only with another woman, her friend Verity, that she can speak out. Sisterhood allows women to be themselves, to freely feel and express themselves because they are equals: "Two women friends, two old friends" (147). Here, the novel seems to suggest that only in an equalitarian relation of friendship, in which communication is possible, can women find real freedom of being. In her interior, Alma reproaches Paul for having allowed their relationship as a couple almost to die in order to concentrate all their energies on the children. Alma directs her anger towards Paul because of his endorsement of patriarchal thought. He has led a comfortable existence as a *pater familias* in a nuclear family with clearly differentiated gender roles. Alma for him was the warrior rest, he "used to let off steam to Alma, every day" (116) because: "She was a good wife. She was . . . selfless, really" (116); and Paul felt lucky and happy with the situation. With the differences stemming from the fact that they belong to different generations, Alma, like Gwen, has

been living in a world organised according to the same patriarchal structures. But Alma, who has taken care of her family for years, who thought that love meant to be needed, that one has to behave according to the expectation of others in order to deserve love, is tired out after Zoe's flight, and wants "someone to look after her" (188), she does not "want to be a sodding wife any more" (77).

In summary, Alma had accepted the model of perfect femininity imposed on women by patriarchy and transmitted to her by her mother. The feminist philosopher Susan Bordo explains how these patriarchal impositions affect women in the following terms:

Our culture still widely advertises domestic conceptions of femininity, the ideological moorings for a rigorously dualistic sexual division of labor that casts woman as chief emotional and physical nurturer. The rules for this construction of femininity (and I speak here in a language both symbolic and literal) require that women learn to feed others, not the self, and to construe any desires for self-nurturance and self-feeding as greedy and excessive. Thus, women must develop a totally other-oriented emotional economy. (2367)

In her own consideration, Alma has been the literal and metaphorical nurturer of her family for years. However, we know that she neglected Adam and even the fact that she breast-fed Zoe was for Alma not only a means of sharing intimate and happy moments with her daughter but also proof or indicator of her excellence as a mother and a way of competing with Gwen, her

own mother. As Alma herself recognises, “I fed her for ten months, to outdo my mother. And because we were happy. Happy together . . . (93). Now she — following this identification between nurturing and caring— wonders: “who’s going to feed her? Who will protect her?” (54). Zoe’s flight also triggers Alma’s desire to escape from this self-imposed duty, she does not want to cook for anyone (77). This sudden dislike of her usual housewifery roles is symptomatic of her desire to be free from her almost slaving condition as perfect wife and mother. But it takes time to break habits, and the first time that Adam and Paul visit her, after yelling at them: “I’m not cooking anything” (77), she is worried because she does not want “the neighbours thinking she never fed them. That her kids ran away because they weren’t looked after” (77). It would seem that it is the very Gwen who talks through Alma’s thoughts but at the same time these thoughts are an example on how mothers feel judged and valued by almost everyone around them. As O’Reilly puts it, mothers “are policed by what Sara Ruddick, the feminist philosopher, calls the “gaze of others” [...] mothers relinquish authority to others, [and] lose confidence in their own values. (7). Although she tries to find an independent and assertive sense of self, Alma still behaves as a submissive woman. When Mr Portico says that “lady staff always take an afternoon off” (Gee 1995, 91), and offers her the opportunity to have a free afternoon a week, she quickly accepts the benefit. Even though Mr Portico does not treat male and female employees equally, she is “charmed and amused by him” (91) and has “a slightly childish dependence on Mr Portico’s good opinion” (81). Indeed, in spite of her need for a change, Alma gives the impression of having changed the actors in her scenario but continues playing a very similar role.

Proof of this is that Alma stereotypes men's skills and classifies them as opposed to women, for example, when she affirms that "men love bonfires [...] men love their axes and secateurs" (75). She sees tastes and inclinations as determined by gender and she positions women as weaker than men and dependant on them. She relates women's happiness and success to the fact of having men in their lives when she thinks: "it's nice to have men. It separates you from those who never married. And the white-haired sisterhood of widows . . . I'm not ready for that, not yet" (74). Norms, social rules and belonging to "normal" people are constant worries for Alma. What is more, she is very afraid of loneliness, which she relates to abnormality —"Single. Singular. A singularity" (30)— and loss —"Alma lost. Alma alone. Alma shrinking towards the singularity" (36).

After throwing Paul and Adam out of home she, for the first time in her life, really lives on her own and alone. Even though the quietude of the house allows her to concentrate on her past, thoughts and self, she cannot avoid fearing the loneliness that she associates with not having a man by her side. She has an interior debate that can be traced back to her childhood when her mother said that unmarried women were spinsters, those who "couldn't get a husband" (39), implying the superiority of married women over this deficient and inferior kind of women, the losers in life's race to catch a man. This image of women fighting other women for a man as a prize is the perfect example of how patriarchal thought has transformed women into the worst enemy of other women (Cixous). As Naomi Wolf contends, this rivalry among women is part of the "Beauty Myth" according to which women are classified and divided into young and beautiful, that is, worthy of men's attentions, whereas ageing is

related to ugliness (14). Even though she considers herself a “good feminist” (152), her mother’s ideas have profoundly influenced Alma, and there is a huge contradiction between her inner side, which admires Eileen and wants to be like her—living outside the rules of well-to-do society, in a way that seems out of time because Eileen “still *acted* young” (43 italics in the original)—and the part of Alma who still needs a man in order to be complete, in spite of wanting “to be herself. To break the pattern.” (234). The fact that Alma eventually repeats with her daughter the type of impositions and behaviour that made her felt misunderstood and unhappy in the past is also very contradictory. Gwen did not listen to Alma’s desires and needs, but Alma was also totally deaf to her daughter’s feelings and thoughts, thus repeating the same pattern of lack of communication.

Although Alma has chosen to be an intensive mother, she has different plans for Adam and Zoe. While she cares nothing for her son, she tries to control her daughter’s education in order to achieve the goals she has predetermined for her. When Zoe was only four or five, during a visit to Paul’s mother, the old lady said to Zoe: “you’re going to marry a sailor, how exciting!” (119), but Alma’s quick response was: “‘She is not,’ [...] ‘She is going to *be* a sailor’” (Gee 119, italics in the original). In this sentence, Alma underlines the idea that every woman has the potential to be whatever she wants, and she imagines all kinds of opportunities in Zoe’s life, even those opportunities she had denied herself. It seems that regarding Zoe’s future, Alma has embraced the type of feminism that expects “having it all” (Waugh, 188): a professional career, a perfect relationship, and a perfect body and, why not, a perfect motherhood. This shows that Alma has interiorised a questionable kind of

feminism, born from the opposition to her previous generation, which is as fixed and imprisoning as patriarchy since women have to reach almost perfection in every field of their lives. This sort of feminism is questionable because it imposes the same old exigencies of patriarchy on women but adding some acquired rights. This impossible and demanding pattern makes being a woman an excessive and hard work and this is the way Zoe lives it. Not only has a woman to be educated, intelligent and brilliant, she also has to be pretty and forever young and this implies being always slim. This canon of beauty, unconsciously interiorised by many contemporary women, is one of the major factors of depressions, lack of self-confidence and unhappiness in women, a new form of patriarchal imprisonment, as the feminist critic, Naomi Wolf accurately states in her book, *The Beauty Myth*:

The affluent, educated, liberated women of the First World, who can enjoy freedoms unavailable to any women ever before, do not feel as free as they want to. And they can no longer restrict to the subconscious their sense that this lack of freedom has something to do with—with apparently frivolous issues, things that really should not matter. Many are ashamed to admit that such trivial concerns—to do with physical appearance, bodies, faces, hair, clothes. (9)

Many women, like Alma, prisoners of these aesthetic canons, impose these pressures not only on themselves but also on their offspring, especially on their daughters, thus acting as the most effective agents of patriarchy. When Adam finally has an encounter with his sister, the first thing he observes is that

Zoe is fatter now and she, a perfect knower of their mother's exigencies, says: "I'm fat as a pig. Mum would hate it, wouldn't she . . . ?" (Gee 1995, 243). As the narrator observes, "Adam knew that Zoe was right. It mattered to Alma how people looked" (243). Why should a girl "still pretty enough to turn heads" (243), describe herself as "a pig"? In spite of being so different from Alma, in spite of having fought for her individuality, Zoe has accepted some of her mother's ideas, and maybe not the best ones. History repeats itself: Alma did not like the way Gwen educated her but her standard of female beauty mirrors that of her mother. This example shows that, for all her rebelliousness, Zoe is immersed in a wheel of repetition whereby children inadvertently acquire their parents' behaviours and ideas. This is why Zoe deprecates herself because, even though partially, she has her mother's imprint.

CHAPTER IV: Alma as a Middle-aged Woman

As the analysis has shown, Alma is not able to liberate Zoe from the patriarchal model of woman, since it is an imposition that she has totally accepted herself. Like many middle-aged British women in the late twentieth century, Alma fights not only against what for her is an excessive weight—slenderness in women seems to be compulsory—, but also against ageing. When she applies for a job to Portico and Sheen, she is conscious that she is overqualified for the job, but she does not try to find a better one because she it would be above her possibilities after so many years out of the market. While preparing for the job interview, she tries to wear those clothes that make her look younger, that “made her hair look blonde, not white”; and she puts on “her only pair of high heels” (55). Alma somehow disguises herself in an attempt to adapt to the requirements of patriarchal society in the labour market. She does not usually wear high heels, this is why she has only one pair, and she is conscious of her grey hair, but she is also totally aware that our competitive society favours youth over experience or qualification. This discrimination is even determinant in the case of women as in their case physical appearance is crucial and sometimes the main factor taken into account when applying for a job. In spite of her over qualification and the fact that the job is not very well paid, Alma feels grateful for being selected because, as Mr Portico says, they use to go for “less experienced people” (56), a euphemism to indicate younger people. Alma sees the job as a “new chance” (81) to construct a totally new

personality unrelated to the familial mother and wife roles. This “new Alma” hates her husband and the domestic role she has played for years, but still has enclosed in her interior a “weeping, shuddering Alma, an Alma who want[s] to kiss him [Paul], curl in his lap, burrow into their past” (84).

Alma herself also falls into the trap of worshipping youth: she thinks that “things happened in your twenties” (82) and that now that she is fifty there is not much to wait for in her life. It seems that Alma tries to recover, together with a certain sense of being young again, all the years she has spent caring after her family. She very often reveals in her process of thought the worry and intention to look younger, even though she is reluctant to admit it: “From behind, she thought, I must look like a girl . . . not that I want to look like a girl [...]. OK, I wouldn’t mind looking like a girl” (92). On the one hand, she tacitly accepts impositions that favour youth in the working place, because, as Wolf explains, they respond to our social reality: “with youth and beauty, then, the working woman is visible, but insecure, made to feel her qualities are not unique. But, without them, she is invisible—she falls, literally, ‘out of the picture’.” (34). This non-written strategy of favouring youth in the labour market also involves the rivalry between women, those who are young against those who are older but most experienced. In Alma’s case, it also has an effect on her personal sphere as it adds to her feelings that her life has been wasted or at least not consciously enjoyed.

Alma lived her adulthood as if she was in an eternal present, time stood still, but once she is propelled to the future by Zoe’s flight, she finds that she “can’t think where time has gone” (46). Suddenly deprived of her

only role as mother, she becomes aware of the passing of time, reflected in her body, of the fact that she is no longer young. Being a mother was her secure and almost fixed identity and she only compared herself to, and competed with other mothers, her equals, in a warfare in which time seemed still. Now that she does not feel like a mother she experiences the need to undertake a psychological journey to the past aimed at filling in the gaps in her memory. But in order to do so she must believe in an eternal present in which nothing is lost: “WHAT IF NOTHING IS LOST, nor can ever be lost . . . ?” (74). This is why she constantly reads about time and entropy, struggling between scepticism and belief (143), and also why, in her loneliness in the middle of the night, she feels overwhelmed by the passing of time and its unavoidability, and wonders about what happens “when you could no longer make new life; when your body was too old to make new babies [...] alone, with time slipping away.” (143). As this thought suggests, Alma felt secure in a seemingly still time when she was not only a mother but also when she was fertile, since fertility is always linked with youth. Therefore, her fear of her loss of fecundity is lived as the loss of her fragile identity constructed around a womanhood exclusively based on her reproductive capacity.

For many women, the passing of time also implies the fear of losing sex-appeal and the consciousness that their “sexual shelf-life is rapidly shortening” (Neustatter, n. p.). This is another factor that lies behind Alma’s sudden interest in looking younger and attractive, much more so as she always measures her value according to the approval of others, not of herself. She even presumes that she is sexually attractive, “still pretty, still

quite young” (Gee 1995, 102); and Ashley, her younger workmate, repeatedly advises her to “[u]se it or lose it, Alma . . .” (101), thus adding to her feeling that the countdown towards old age is on. When she goes to the pool, she buys a swimsuit in brilliant pink because, as she reflects “[n]o one will look at [her]” (104) with a more discrete model. She wants to be visible, she feels “good,” “great,” “tall and slim” (105) wearing the streaking swimsuit. When she is coquettishly walking on the Sport Complex she is conscious of being noticed by the gaze of others, especially men, and prefers “them to look at her now, all the same, while she still ha[s] her wild cloud of curly pale hair falling over her shoulders like a veil,” that is, when she presents her best appearance. Still, although her behaviour implies acceptance of patriarchal thought, she innerly rebels against these expectations of beauty that impose unattainable perfection standards on women’s bodies whereas men are allowed to be imperfect:

I wish I didn’t have to think what I looked like. All women have to think what they look like. I wish I were a man, and could stare my self, and not give two hoots about the paunch and the baldness. They never seem to mind, do they? They never seem embarrassed by their little defects. (105)

But, in spite of recognising the injustice of this gender discrimination, Alma, like many other contemporary women, *de facto* accepts patriarchal society’s impositions. Unable to avoid these contradictions, she is half pleased, half resentful when a man younger than her, a weight-lifter,

addresses her and calls her pretty. She recognises in him the predatory man, and feels exposed and available to him because the education imposed on her denies her the right to be rude: “it’s just Gwen [...]. Always telling me to be a good girl, always telling me to think of others.” (111-12). After rejecting the unknown man’s clearly sexual advances, she feels even guilty for having been tough and meditates on the weak and dangerous situation she is placed at by her patriarchal education. Significantly, it is after this episode that she becomes conscious of the oppression, discrimination and gender exclusion suffered by women, and suddenly wonders whether she has done the same to her daughter: “Did I just repeat things?” (112). This doubt synthesises a central question the novel poses: Are women the best upholders and transmitters of patriarchal ideology?

Throughout the novel, Alma demonstrates that she is a woman who, far from being liberated, still has many prejudices and stereotypes not only about women’s physical appearance but also about that of men. This is made evident when she meets a client who, according to her mates, resembles a real tennis-player called Stefan Edberg. Reporting Alma’s thought, the narrator describes his physical features as “unnervingly handsome [...] tall and slender” (127). But then her inner voice adds: “*All the same, he’s much too good to be straight.*” (127, italics in the original). This description reveals that Alma applies common gender stereotypes associated with the language of cheap novelettes, according to which beauty is restricted to women and so, if a man is beautiful, he must be gay. This association with romance clichés is strengthened when Alma goes on to

reflect that this type of man simply cannot be real: “Too pure a dream. The puppet hero from a TV film.” (129).

The man, who is called Simon Edwards, a name with the same initials as the tennis player, tells Alma that she reminds him of his mother, something that can be true or simply a rapprochement strategy since, far from being gay, he is obviously interested in having sex with her. As has been explained in Chapter I, when analysing Alma’s infantile trauma, this is the man who triggers the recovery of Alma’s remembrances of her real father, Daddy, when he attempts to seduce her. But not only that, Edwards/Edberg represents the renewal of Alma’s sense of being sexually attractive, younger and free, an important element in the configuration of the new Alma who wants to be a woman instead of a mother. Thanks to Edberg’s attentions and interest, she feels that her body is appreciated, sexually attractive, in spite of her lost fertility. This is why “her thoughts crept back to him, every now and then” (129) and wished “Edberg to want to touch her” (136), for, as she reflects, “[t]here was nothing more exciting than someone else’s interest. . .” (136). These thoughts make Alma feel stimulated, revitalised and, in sum, younger. Even if she is not really interested in him, she still values herself depending on the gaze of others, on the others’ approval. In other words, Alma wrongly tries to construct the new Alma, her desired new and strong identity, by expelling her husband and son from her life. But she does so with the same old parameters, founding her value on the others’ opinions, trying to be the pretty good girl her mother wanted her to be. And this is why, so far, she has not found

happiness or an answer, even if she has changed the setting and the actors in her life.

Significantly, one way in which Alma seeks solace and answers is art. Thus, when she visited the Art Gallery to see an exhibition of Bonnard paintings, she looked for the garden scenes and “found them finally alive and warm, in a chilly corner of the upper gallery” (96). She then “sat and stared at a picnic scene until [...] she knew she was inside that picture, inside that moment” (96), and had a sudden revelation, the comprehension that Bonnard was still alive, that “*there is no death, since there is this painting [...]*” (96, italics in the original). Then, the epiphany faded but leaving her with the tantalising realisation that: “Love somehow lets you into the picture. Allows you to enter. Love allows.” (97); and also that, if she looked:

[she] could move through time [...] leave [...] the prison of [her ...] wounded body [...] and] slip inside those golden, childlike bodies. [...] All would be explained, redeemed, forgiven. They would all be there (for the faces weren't specific, Bonnard's rune-like faces allowed any names); all Alma's loved ones. All that she loved. (97)

This revelation teaches Alma that, in order to overcome her present misery, she must go back to her childhood and look at it from the new perspective provided by love.

CHAPTER V: Childless Women: Sheilah and Verity

There is another class of lost mothers in the novel, that of women who are childless. These women base their life and identity on their professional careers even though they are in a society which still denies them the same rights as men. Professional women, like Sheilah and Verity, Alma's friends, work under rules different from those of men. Sheilah, a successful television journalist, is a good example of the many late-twentieth British women who feel the need to adjust their bodies and behaviour to what Naomi Wolf calls "The Beauty Myth":

"Beauty" is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.

(12)

This system is even more evident and unavoidable in the TV world, where image is primordial. Sheilah has the same age as Alma, but she denies the fact because, as she says: "In television, fifty is *death*. If you're female, that is. It's beyond the pale" (Gee 1995, 147, emphasis in the

original). In the television field ageing is seen as ugly and unacceptable if one is a woman, whereas in the case of men things are totally different. Men's personality is accepted as a primordial element and they are recognised as wiser and more powerful with age. They do not need to meet any beauty canon in order to be appreciated. Women are denied their condition as individuals and reduced to that of attractive bodies that need to be adjusted in order to comply with certain rules. Women are useful while they are young as their value is based on their young and perfect bodies, while men's individuality is always respected and unrelated to their bodies' adjustment to a physical canon. Further, while in the case of women, ugliness is not considered to be a manifestation of their personality, in the case of men it becomes the expression of a strong individuality, as Wolf points out:

A powerful man is an individual, whether that individuality is expressed in asymmetrical features, lines, gray hair, hairpieces, baldness, bulbousness, tubbiness, facial tics, or a wattled neck; and that his maturity is part of his power. (34)

Though Sheilah is an experienced professional she considers time her worst enemy simply because she is a woman. She is denied the right to be considered attractive and powerful in her mature age. Even though going against time is a battle doomed to failure, Sheilah thinks she must undertake it: "It's defeatist to get old" (147). Sheilah is representative of what Dillon and Edwards describe as a person affected by the "death denial thesis," that

is, the thesis that there is a tendency in our Western society towards disavowing “the natural processes of ageing and dying, as well as arousing shocking resistance to the visual signs of ageing” (14). Sheilah, like Alma, until her middle age, has been living unaware of the future, trying to make the present permanent. Sheilah, who is in her late forties in the narrative present, is very glamorous, childless, and had lived a rather different life from that of Alma. She has led a family-free, emotionally superficial and sexually promiscuous life, incautious to the point of being in risk of AIDS infection. But for all these differences, Sheilah and Alma share the idea that the youth of women is measured by their capacity to procreate. While Alma has tried to prolong her youth and recover her apparent lost time by building a new identity away from her family, Sheilah —suddenly aware of the biological watch alerting her that it is almost too late to be a mother— tries to remain young by having a child.

Sheilah represents a regular worry in Gee’s fiction, for instance in *Where Are the Snows*, it is the very protagonist, Alexandra, who tries to extend her fertility and become a mother in her late middle age. As Sarah Falcus explains, “[t]his desire for a child is presented as desperate and clearly as a way in which she can extend her own youthfulness by proving her fecundity” (93). Alexandra and Sheilah’s attempt to affirm their own value by becoming mothers responds to the widespread belief that, as Cixous explains, “when pregnant, the woman not only doubles her market value, but—what’s more important—takes on intrinsic value as a woman in her own eyes and undeniably, acquires body and sex.” (2054). In the case of Sheilah, more than a question of granting value to her body and sexuality,

it is a question of recuperating a bodily youth and sexuality that are in danger of being lost by the passing of time, since her identity was strongly based in a perfect body that is no longer young. Sheilah ignores all the common-sense objections to such a late pregnancy; she “desperately, enormously” (Gee 1995, 153) desires to be a mother. Her desire is even more dramatic as she chose to give her first baby in adoption when she was 21 years old. Her baby would have been an impediment to escape from poverty, a chain around her neck. But after years of professional career, she declares that “we childless women all feel guilty [...]. As if we’re hard, or not proper women” (152). The same children that become a burden for young women pursuing a professional career can become an essential element for prolonging middle-aged women’s feelings of being young, and consequently, for the construction of their self-image. Through Sheila, the novel presents the decision of having or not children as a sadly discriminatory element conditioning the professional development of women as well as their own perception of their intrinsic value.

In spite of linking motherhood to women’s identity in general, the novel also presents an initial generational change in the way women confront an unwanted pregnancy. Although she was unable to keep her baby when she was 21, Sheilah decided to give her in adoption instead of having an abortion. Alma, who belongs to the same generation as Sheilah, declares herself “weird about abortion” (152) and struggles to reconcile her definition of herself as “a good feminist” (152) with the hatred she feels even for the thought of an abortion. By contrast, Zoe does not understand her mother’s position and qualifies it as “illogical” (152). Furthermore, the

trigger of Zoe's flight was that she was pregnant and initially did not want to be obliged by her mother's ideas to have the baby. But after having the abortion Zoe does not feel happy about it; what is more, she says that "the awful thing is . . . maybe [Alma]'s right" (245). Zoe feels "like a *bad person*" (245, emphasis in the original) because she knows that her mother loves babies and she could have been able to keep the baby with Alma's help. Discussing this issue, Kiliç asserts that the novel is critical with modern living conditions "that [do] not support a life with children" (90); and she links poverty with the capacity to keep children. Kiliç is quite right when she affirms that Sheilah did not keep her baby because she wanted to have a better life and the baby would have been an impediment to escape from poverty. In spite of this, poverty was not the main reason, but rather the fact that, as argued above, the baby would have been an obstacle for the development of Sheila's career.

Alma's other friend is Verity, a successful novelist. Their friendship, like that of Alma and Sheilah, goes back to their youth, when Alma was her editor. Verity is also childless, but unlike Sheilah, her renouncement of motherhood has not been a conscious election, but the direct consequence of putting things off to a moment in the future that never comes. When she was young she was "too poor, or too scared, it's the same thing" (48), so time elapsed and now that she is in her fifties she really "regret[s] it" (48). Moreover, when she learns about fifty-year-olds pregnant women, she renews her hope that is it not too late for her yet. Although she is a successful woman with a prominent career as a writer, and although she knows that the presence of children would have compromised her

professional excellence, at this stage Verity is ready to admit to herself, though not to Alma, that she would have exchanged her career for motherhood: “*So what, in any case. If I’d had kids, I wouldn’t have cared.*” (48, italics in the original). One source of Verity’s vital dissatisfaction is her knowledge that she has frustrated her father’s expectations. Verity’s father, a famous literary critic, ostensibly underestimated her daughter’s novels by making relatively few comments about them and always critical ones (275). Verity’s father never understood why her daughter did not marry and was disappointed by the fact that she was childless. He did not value her daughter’s work, apparently because what he wanted from her daughter was grand-children. For him, children were: “his way into the future” (276), that is, his only way to conquer time and achieve immortality. As Alma cleverly retorts: “he’ll have to put up with [Verity’s] book instead” (276).

If Sheila was affected by gender stereotypes prevalent in the TV field, Verity is the victim of gender prejudices in the literary world. His bias against her daughter’s writing, situates Verity’s father in line with the long tradition of men’s questioning of women’s capability to write, denounced by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, which has so crucially contributed to foment the “fears of sterility and the anxieties of authorship from which women have suffered” (Gilbert and Gubar 44). The fact that she is not taken seriously by her father would explain why Verity literally fears sterility both in her body and work. Her father’s negative attitude would also explain why, in spite of her publishing success, Verity is not very confident about her own value as a writer.

The inclusion of this character in the novel can be seen as a metatextual strategy used by the author to bring to the fore her own anxieties and complaints about how a woman writer is still criticised and received in our contemporary times, given that literature itself and “its truth-telling through lies” (Dillon and Edwards 3) are a “dominant concern in Gee’s fiction” (3). The author herself expressed her dissatisfaction with the status of “women writers” when she made the following comment:

I have become aware that all women who write are perceived as women writers. And I’m afraid that in this instance women writers usually means ‘lesser writers’ [...]. The act of reviewing is too often an act of domination or colonisation, and critics start to map their territory by categorising consciously or unconsciously in terms of gender. (Gee and Appignanesi, 173)

In the case of *Verity*, the dismissive literary critic is her own father, so that there are two different issues converging. On the one hand, he represents the patriarchal father who had a rather fixed idea of gender roles and expected her daughter to be first and foremost a wife and a mother; and, on the other, the male-chauvinistic critic who, faced with a famous writer who happens to be a woman, only sees a woman writer, and this fact prevents him from a serious consideration of her work.

Gee has also claimed that literary critics are often indifferent to style and form when the book is signed by a woman, and that the critics are also often led by expectations (Gee and Appignanesi, 173-74) such as that

women should write about womanly issues and restrict themselves to writing either as feminist activists or as women only worried by family issues and romantic love. In the novel, Verity is only described as a writer without labels: neither as a feminist writer nor as a writer of novelettes. And this is probably one of the main claims of the author regarding her own work because, as she insists, echoing Woolf, “the act of writing goes beyond physical gender” (Gee and Appignanesi 173).

CONCLUSION

According to the author's manifest intention, Magee Gee did not intend *Lost Children* to be a novel about a woman's mid-life crisis (Neustatter n. p.) but about "the relationship between the generations, which often swims into focus in middle age (Gee and Appignanesi 176). However, as the analysis has attempted to show, Alma is a female character evincing all the symptoms of this mid-life crisis —triggered by her daughter's flight— which among other things brings to the surface her infantile trauma and Alma's psychological quest. She has to undertake a very tough process of remembrance of her childhood experiences in order to incorporate her traumatic past into the present and, thus, to acquire a sense of identity, completeness and unified self.

The novel strenuously defends children as innocent victims, both targets and recipients of adult's ambition. Children are the basis for any society and none of them should be lost. Our childhood predetermines not only our identity and personality but also conditions future generations, because "always the children became the parents" (Gee 1995, 315). Children from the past —Alma— or from the present —Zoe— must be saved in order to preserve future children and adults. The novel argues that children are to be loved and their fundamental rights cared for and shows how extremely significant is the mother/children relationship in the development of the child.

But mothers are usually lost themselves, because they have very often tacitly accepted a suffocating patriarchal model of motherhood that causes their own fragmentation, between the mother they are expected to be by our still patriarchal society and the woman who has her own desires and ambitions. Mothers like Gwen or Alma are engaged in a wheel of repetition in which women become the best bringers of patriarchal ideology. Women have to be intelligent, educated, sacrificed and fulfil a number of requirements concerning not only their behaviour but also their body shape, which must remain slim, attractive and young as long as they want to be valued. This self-imposition of an unfair ideal model of woman/mother provokes unhappiness and inner fragmentation between the woman's part which tries to fulfil this unattainable perfection and that which fights to be freed. Alma is a representative example of this inner struggle, especially apparent when a woman is in her middle age and realises that this ideal model of woman/mother is discriminating and unreachable, thereby placing women in a very vulnerable situation where they lose their value at the same time as their reproductive capacity and youth. These unwritten but sadly real social rules lie at the bottom of many mid-life crises, particularly when it comes to women.

Like many female characters in Gee's fiction, Alma is "at the end of being young" and manifests a characteristic obsession with death (Dillon and Edwards 15), expressed in the fear of losing her sexual appeal and her fertility. In order to overcome this death drive, Alma needs to find a new purpose in life in consonance with her mid-life stage. As we are reminded by the Bible: "to every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose

under the heaven. A time to be born and a time to die.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Alma seems to be aware of this biblical recommendation when she tells herself that we human beings “have to go on. Until the time comes when we can’t do it any more. Until time closes over us” (277). But this thought does not answer the crucial question at the core of her unrest, namely, that if no one needs her, where can she find her value? Gee proposes love as the only solution, for ageing, self-esteem, and social and gender issues. Love is in this novel far more important than any other consideration, in the ending it closes the circle and puts everything again in its place. Love allows us to be ourselves, to reconcile our desires and the needs of the others.

Furthermore, *Lost Children* explores both personal/domestic concerns and societal, political and global issues. Very socially committed, Gee herself “explains that the main concerns of her writing are precisely those things that cause ‘the English to fall silent’: ‘sex, the emotions, class, race, money, success, failure, excretion of course, illness, age and death’ (2015, 13). Poverty, embodied in the figure of homeless people, is also related with abortion and the capacity to have children, according to Kiliç (90). But in the Western world the measurement of poverty is radically different from that of Third- or Second-World countries. The two unborn babies mentioned in the novel are Zoe’s abortion (245) and a miscarriage (41) that Gwen had after giving birth to Alma —fathered by her second husband, Owen—, and none of them were caused by poverty. The novel, thus, seems to be more critical of those Western society’s impositions on women that deny them the opportunity to combine a professional career with motherhood.

Professional women have to choose between their career and their family, like Sheilah and Verity, who put their working future first; or Alma, who sacrificed her professional development in order to have kids. As Alma meditates, this state of things creates a Western world plenty of childless women while in the developing world, “where people are fertile and horribly poor, the children huddle and steal and starve, grow up without parents or food or love” (Gee 1995, 279). Through Alma, Gee defends children as bearers of hope and future and is critical of this contrast between both worlds. We live in a capitalist and patriarchal world which puts economy and material things above children and, thus, above nature; a world where women and also couples postpone the decision to have children to the point that, frequently, it is too late. Men like Kevin—Alma’s workmate in Portico and Sheen—submit fatherhood to other goals in life. As he reflects: “It’s death having kids, at my age. I want to get on. Make something of myself” (67). But men have a longer fertility period than women, and it is women who frequently have to sacrifice their motherhood in favour of their work. This is an unfair situation because, as O’Reilly claims, “[c]hildren need love and care, but it is culture, not children, that demands that the mother be the one to provide such love and care” (5). This unwritten but prevalent social norm lies at the heart of the increasing number of “lost” mothers and children in our contemporary world. Women do not have a real opportunity to choose whether to be mothers or not because they have to pay something in exchange. This is a social reality that is also reflected in some social studies that conclude that young professional women decide against having babies because “they are not confident that

they can successfully combine motherhood and career” (Yogeh and Vierra, 1).

As the analysis has attempted to show, the novel claims that we should have the opportunity to be ourselves, to have the capacity and possibility to decide whether to have children or not, to pursue professional success or not, and to behave one way or another regarding society’s expectations and rules. And this freedom of choice can only be provided by being really ourselves, the owners of our body and decisions. It is for this reason that love is the only and necessary element, as “love allows us to be ourselves” (Gee 1995, 78). The new and unified Alma acknowledges at the end that she would “have to make a life for [her]self” (314) and now, in her fifties, it is the right moment to start doing so, because she is “old enough to be myself” (314). Thus, the former mid-life crisis becomes the rebirth of the new Alma, authentic, unified, stronger and happier, in sum, her real self. It is this combination of personal, domestic, social and global issues emerging from the novel that makes *Lost Children* an ambitious and thematically rich novel with the capacity to make readers empathise with Alma, the *a priori* unlikeable main character.

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