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"Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* and Clarice Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart*: An Observation of the Role of 'Family' in the Shaping of Childhood Using John Bowlby's Theory of Attachment"

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Abstract: Making use of John Bowlby's theory of attachment this article explores different aspects regarding the role of family in the shaping of childhood, focusing on the experiences of the protagonists of Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) and Clarice Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart* (1943) to measure the impact their families have had in their upbringing and how this has shaped their lives and personalities. For that matter, we will also discuss the notion of 'childhood', defining and contextualizing it in order to analyze these two works and their protagonists.

Keywords: Bowlby, Lispector, Franklin, Attachment, Trauma, Childhood.

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Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* and Clarice Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart*: An Observation of the Role of 'Family' in the Shaping of Childhood Using John Bowlby's Theory of Attachment

0. Introduction

This paper discusses different aspects regarding the role of family (namely, parents, but also other members of the nuclear family circle) in the shaping of childhood, making use of John Bowlby's theory of attachment. In order to do so, two works written around the same time in different sociocultural and geographical contexts will be used: Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant*

Career (1901) and Clarice Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart* (1943). These two novels provide us with two protagonists whose upbringing is inevitably conditioned by their families, mostly in their childhoods though also subsequently in their adolescences. For that matter, we will also discuss the notion of 'childhood', defining and contextualizing it in order to analyze these two works and their protagonists, making use of extracts from both novels for their study. By doing so, we will be able to measure the impact their families have had in their upbringing and how it has shaped their lives and personalities, as these interactions will lay the foundations for their growth.

In the case of *My Brilliant Career*, we have young Sybylla Melvyn, born and raised in the rural Australia of the 1890s. Her family struggles economically due to poor decision making and the terrible drought that hit the country during that time. All of the children have to help sustaining the farm they live in, which results in awful schedules and arduous labor. Consequently, Sybylla has to quit her passions, such as writing, reading and playing the piano. Her internal growth comes to a halt, which makes for a lot of resent and frustration on her behalf towards her parents. She does not have a good relationship with her mother, with whom she fights constantly, while her father has become a drunk and has acquired numerous debts, being mostly absent at home, both physically and emotionally. Luckily, Sybylla is sent to live with her grandmother in Caddagat, a region which has been said to correspond to real life Talabingo, New South Wales, where Miles Franklin was raised ("Brilliant"). Caddagat will be the salvation for Sybylla's obstructed youth, although she will eventually be forced by her circumstances to go back to her parent's farm, not before having to work as a governess to pay off her father's debt. Sybylla proves to be a somewhat self-absorbed and presumably unreliable narrator of her misfortunes; the book is presented as her writing of her struggles in a diary, so everything the reader knows is filtered by her in the first person singular.

On the other hand, we have Joana, the eccentric protagonist of *Near to the Wild Heart*. The title is borrowed from a quote by James Joyce in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), which is one of the reasons why Lispector's narrative is compared to that of the Modernists, such as Virginia Woolf and Joyce. The main reason is the nature of her writing, making use of techniques like interior monologue/stream of consciousness to make up Joana's story in this novel. She does consciously reference and echo Baruch Spinoza, whom she extensively quotes and paraphrases in this work, acknowledging his clear influence on her writing and disregarding the comparisons made between her and Joyce:

Many answers are to be found in Spinoza's statements. For example in the idea that there cannot be thought without extension (a mode of God) and vice-versa, isn't the morality of the soul affirmed? [...] Neither understanding or volition are part of God's nature, says Spinoza. This makes me happier and freer. Because the idea of the existence of a conscious God is horribly dissatisfying. (Lispector 114)

However, her narrative style cannot escape our eye, as here Joana is making a recount of the present with several flashbacks and reflections on her human condition in a non-linear narrative. Her mother died when she was little, her father died afterwards, and

when she was put in the care of her aunt she was shipped off to boarding school, eventually becoming an introspective and lonesome adult. This is further emphasized by the previously mentioned style Lispector makes use of to portray Joana's life, as a fragmented image of her is created, signaling her psychological struggles. Lispector uses Spinoza's writings to question good and evil and the conception of these notions in our society, creating a pretty amoral character for Joana, who also questions these precepts, both in her thoughts and through her own actions. Due to this amount of trauma, she proves to be detached from her own reality, seen in remarks such as "I'm neither happy nor sad" (Lispector 42) or when in free indirect style it is stated that she is "scrutinizing herself without understanding herself [...]. When she emerges from the tub she is a stranger who doesn't know what to feel" (Lispector 57). It is a conscious effort: "She kept her ears half closed by contracting her face muscles, her closed eyes barely letting any light through [...]. Little by little she managed to really isolate herself" (Lispector 72).

1. Childhood and Bowlby's Theory of Attachment

To begin with, we must discuss the notion of 'childhood'. Nowadays, there are several elements that would make us qualify this period in a child's life as 'good': loving families, for them to learn how to experience and express love; friends, to explore the world outside their families; a positive lifestyle, in which to develop their own interests; solid values, acquired from their surroundings; and a proper state of mental health overall, among others (Dunn and Layard 10). Nevertheless, the preservation of childhood has not always been a priority in our society. The interest grew around the 19th century, when "an ideology of childhood had become a powerful force in middle-class Europe and North America" with a firm "conviction that the way childhood was spent was crucial in determining the kind of adult that the child would become", together with "an increasing awareness that childhood had rights and privileges of its own" (Cunningham "Children" 41). This is because the 19th century was also the time of the Industrial Revolution, of the "children without childhood", which must have triggered the growing concern for this stage in human development, and thus talk of "a child's right to childhood" began (Cunningham "Invention" 14). For that matter, numerous organizations were developed for the well-being of children, such as "compulsory schools, youth groups, welfare agencies, and correctional institutions for the young", which at the same time were "the source of some pride among the more enlightened elements of society" (Sommerville 189). In addition to all this, in the 20th century the amount of "advice literature" for parents escalated as a source they could turn to for help when raising their children (Cunningham "Children" 183), since society had already made so much progress regarding this issue. What years does 'childhood' comprise then? Although there is an ongoing debate about this, we could situate childhood somewhere between infancy and puberty, which is an accepted standard.

Childhood has proven to be a defining time in human existence; it is the period where the manner in which the affective bonds that will probably function throughout our lives is established. This is where John Bowlby's attachment theory comes into action. To start with, he remarks that "during the course of healthy development, attachment behavior leads to the development of affectional bonds" and later on adds that those "forms of

behavior and the bonds to which they lead are present and active throughout the life cycle", as stated before (Bowlby "Attachment" 39). This is why it is so important to look at the childhood of both of our protagonists and explore how it unraveled, considering as well the role their families have had in their emotional development. On top of this, for instance, it has been proven that "the prolonged deprivation of a young child of maternal care may have grave and far-reaching effects on his character and so on the whole of his future life" (Bowlby "Child Care" 53). This deprivation can be physical and/or emotional and can result from the absence of the father figure as well. This is why the role of family (whether biological or adoptive) is essential, as it is the source of "caregiving", the behavior "complementary to attachment behavior and serving the function of protecting the attached individual" that is "commonly showed by a parent, or other adult, towards a child or adolescent" (Bowlby "Attachment" 40-41).

2. Sybylla and Joana: Character Analysis

Firstly, we will consider Sybylla, from *My Brilliant Career*. She and her siblings must help their parents by working on the farm that they live in, as mentioned before, with hardly any time left for rest, let alone any sort of amusement. Sybylla is on bad terms with her parents overall, as she herself expresses. Of her father she states:

Dick Melvyn being my father did not blind me to the fact that he was a despicable, selfish, weak creature, and as such I despised him with the relentlessness of fifteen, which makes no allowance for human frailty and weakness. Disgust, not honour, was the feeling which possessed me when I studied the matter. (Franklin 15)

In addition, she says of her mother:

My mother is a good woman—a very good woman—and I am, I think, not quite all criminality, but we do not pull together. I am a piece of machinery which, not understanding, my mother winds up the wrong way, setting all the wheels of my composition going in creaking discord. (Franklin 28)

This already sets us off to an inauspicious start. Moreover, she reflects that "parents have a duty to children greater than children to parents, and they who do not fulfil their responsibility in this respect [...] corrupt their community as much as a thief, and are among the ablest underminers of their nation" (Franklin 204). In a way, this thought allows us to see that Sybylla is well aware of the deficiencies in her childhood, her role models and her attachment figures. We know that her father is not much more than a drunk in her eyes, in addition to being the reason why they live a poor life in all senses. Her mother, who should be the other figure she could turn to for support, seems to have disowned her emotionally and disregards her and her needs; they do not get along or understand each other. Although Sybylla is generally presented to us, especially during her time at Caddagat, as an immature and superficial adolescent, she shows a deep sense of self and maturity in these reflections about her own parents. This self-awareness points us to a character development that might

take place after the events of the book, but which we can already glimpse at when she has to leave Caddagat in order to pay off her father's debt by working as a governess, and when she subsequently returns to her family farm. We could conclude that her ultimate attempt to take a hold of her life takes place when she rejects her suitor, Harold Beecham, a wealthy and handsome young man she meets during her time in Caddagat. By refusing Harold she gives up a life of commodities he could have easily provided for her, but she decides to assert her own independence and does not want her story to culminate in marriage. Perhaps this is the way she finds to take care of herself, as she had to learn to be on her own (emotionally-wise) since early childhood.

Secondly, we will study Joana in *Near to the Wild Heart*. The novel is narrated in free indirect style with the use of interior monologue and stream of consciousness at times, as we have already stated. Therefore, we get Joana's thoughts almost directly expressed to us even though they are not in the first person singular. Her situation is different to Sybylla's because she becomes an orphan, so the emotional neglect is intermixed with the loss of both her parents. Her mother passed away first, and when she was still young her father died as well, so she was later adopted by her aunt (her father's sister) and uncle, which caused disruptions in her new household. This results in Joana being sent to live at a boarding school on account of her behavior and seemingly deviant morals, because her aunt is at unease with having her around, qualifying her as "a cold viper" and telling her husband that there is "no love or gratitude" in Joana, that "there's no point liking her, no point doing the right thing by her" (Lispector 43); a conversation that Joana overhears. However, she is not too fond of her aunt either, as seen when she is first taken to their house:

'Poor little orphan!'

She felt her face violently pulled away from her aunt's bosom by her fat hands and was observed by her for a second. The aunt went from one movement to the next with no transition, in quick, brusque jolts. [...] Her aunt's tongue and mouth were squishy and warm like a dog's. [...] The aunt's bosom could bury a person! (Lispector 28-29)

Here, we can see that Joana is remembering this episode in free indirect style and she shifts from "her aunt" to "the aunt". The change in the determiner denotes already a sense of detachment and somewhat disgust toward her aunt, as seen in the last sentence from that passage, specifically when saying that "the aunt's bosom could bury a person". Moreover, there is a sense of entrapment and discomfort in her description. Taking into account that she has lost her father and is now taken into a new environment she dislikes, we can understand how her childhood is disrupted and how she is emotionally neglected, no matter the circumstances of such neglect. Joana reflects, as an adult:

He would end up hating her, as if she were demanding something of him. Like her aunt and uncle who respected her however, sensing that she didn't love her pleasures. Confusedly they supposed her to be superior and despised her. Oh God, she was remembering again, telling herself her story, justifying herself... [...] And

with that she became a woman and aged. She believed herself to be very powerful and felt unhappy. [...] That was how Joana grew, man, slender as a pine tree, very courageous too. [...] She learned to think at a young age and because she hadn't seen any human being up close except herself, she was awe-struck, she suffered, her pride was painful, sometimes light but almost always difficult to carry. (Lispector 163)

In this extract we can perceive Joana's awareness of her lack of caregivers and how that has conditioned her childhood and growth. These observations are similar to Sybylla's, as previously quoted. She realizes that she grew up with no role model whatsoever and, what is more, without any parent figure to develop bonds of affection with. She feels doomed and isolated, which is perhaps what separates her from moral standards throughout the events that are recounted in the novel. As she herself puts it in her thoughts, the only example of a living being she felt close to her was her own presence, her own self. This explains the detachment from reality she experiences and exhibits, as she has ostracized herself. Moreover, in this isolation she has separated herself from the norm and the morals that surrounded her but did not permeate through her isolated state. She experiences a great deal of trauma, and as a means to cope with it, she exhibits traits of a dissociative identity disorder, which is a common response to child neglect, whether physical and/or emotional. Although we will not delve into psychological diagnosis, this sensation of "detachment" or "feeling as one is outside one's body, and loss of memory or amnesia" (Wang "Dissociative") is Joana's response to her lack of 'caregivers' during her childhood, leaving an empty space where her attachment figures should have been present. Her case is much more radical than Sybylla's. She describes it quite accurately in one passage, narrated as an interior monologue in free indirect style:

She couldn't soothe herself by saying: this is just a pause, life will come afterwards like a wave of blood, washing over me, moistening my parched wood. She couldn't fool herself because she knew she was also living and that those moments were the peak of something difficult, of a painful experience for which she should be thankful: almost as if she were feeling time outside herself, in a detached manner. (Lispector 25)

Looking at both Joana and Sybylla, we can see how they have developed without a healthy dynamic in their families regarding attachment as understood by Bowlby. In the case of Sybylla, it is due to two main factors: a lack of leisure and insufficient family support. Furthermore, her basic needs are barely covered due to the economic situation in her household. She has no space to grow, while her intellectual and emotional needs are not seen or regarded as relevant, as indispensable. On the other hand, Joana experiences loss on account of the decease of both her parents. This, among other things, results in her distancing herself from her aunt and uncle; she is put in a place where she does not fit in and then she is sent away with no regard to her emotional needs whatsoever. Her aunt does not want her around, and she does not want to live with them anyways. However, the

responsibility should be put in the hands of the adults, as a young, orphaned child cannot possibly be expected to be mature and responsible enough to take care of herself. Therefore, her childhood is fragmented, as is her character, and due to this she becomes an emotionally unavailable and quite dysfunctional adult. While Sybylla is immature at times, Joana appears to lack basic knowledge in grounds such as empathy, usually acquired in childhood from living with one's family, as she herself states in the passage cited above: "she hadn't seen any human being up close except herself". Sybylla and Joana suffer a similar situation, though not identical, as they both experience the absence of a foundation like the one provided by figures of attachment.

3. Conclusion

The role of family in the process or formation in childhood is crucial due to the affective bonds that are meant to be established at this stage at various levels. Firstly, regarding the bare necessities of a child; secondly, the fundamental emotional support and teachings a caregiver (whether being a biological parent or a foster family) must provide; and lastly, a safe environment for the child to develop their own personality and interests, while also being able to apply everything they learn from their positive experience of growth and maturing. In both *My Brilliant Career* and *Near to the Wild Heart* we have instances of parental neglect. To start with, Sybylla does not feel she has a father figure or any sort of backup from her mother, leaving her feeling lonesome and unprotected, meaning that if childhood is the base on which all else is built, her foundations are not entirely consolidated. Similarly, Joana experiences this lack and emptiness as well. Even after losing both her parents, her aunt and uncle are unable to understand and support her. Moreover, she herself is unable to cope with her grief and cannot establish any emotional –or even social– contact with her relatives, whom she dismissed entirely. Taking all this into account, in both cases we can conclude the role of family has led into an anomalous childhood and for that matter has set up a rocky path into adulthood.

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Bioprofile of the author

Valeria Iglesias (1995) holds a BA degree in English Studies from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, focusing on Literature as the main field of study. Thanks to the Erasmus+ Exchange Programme, she spent a semester at the University of Kent in Canterbury (UK), where she took part in subjects from the English Literature Department and the Comparative Literature Department. Her bachelor's thesis, for which she was granted high honours, was titled "The Nature of Evil in Thomas Harris' Fiction: Is Hannibal Lecter God/Satan in Disguise?" Her research interests oscillate between literature in popular culture, questioning the Western canon, and examining non-canonical literatures. She is also drawn to intertextuality and hypertexts, regarding the Bible and Classical works as seminal texts in Western literature. She has also participated as a speaker in the First UAM Postgraduate Seminar in Liminality Studies (2018), and she will publish a chapter in the third volume of *The Gothic Handbook* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), edited by Emeritus Professor Clive Bloom from Middlesex University. She is going to continue her studies as a Master of Arts candidate in 2019, participating in a postgraduate literature programme abroad.

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