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Approaching the Ideal Self through Love: Lacan's *objet petit a* and Representations of Love in *The Color Purple*, *Poor Things*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Abstract

Using Jacques Lacan's theories of subjectivity, this dissertation analyses the relationships between the ideal selves and the romantic desires of characters in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondous Life of Oscar Wao*. Lacan argues that there is an inherent lack in all human beings, stemming from incompleteness and early helplessness, and employs the notion of the *objet petit a*, the cause for desire, to represent a subject's desire to redress their lack. Furthermore, Lacan employs the notion of the Imaginary, to denote subjectivity as a specular image, as well as the Symbolic and the Other, to denote subjectivity directing itself through language. These terms explain how the Lacanian subject's lack is generated and how desire is diverted to symbolic objects. The dissertation will examine the applicability of Lacan's paradigms to readings of the three novels. Building on these readings, this dissertation suggests that characters seek romantic partners as a way of validation and accomplishment, often with patriarchal overtones. This dissertation examines representations of love and romantic attraction to analyse the possible subconscious relation between romantic desire and self-realisation.

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Introduction

This dissertation uses Jacques Lacan's (1901-1981) paradigm of the *objet petit a* to examine the representation of desire in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). A commonly held belief is that one cannot choose whom one loves. Conversely, many people also cling to the ideal of the free and autonomous individual made prevalent during the Enlightenment. As the schools of thought that follow the Age of Enlightenment, in particular post-structuralism, tend to question the free and autonomous self, an examination of these theories could potentially help explain why people fall in love and form relationships with other people. One of the most influential developers of post-structuralism is the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who is notable for challenging 'the common sense idea that language exists in order to communicate', arguing that language 'is instead the very material of subjectivity'.[1] Hence, this thesis will examine literary representations of the relation between love and the self, through the use of Lacan's ideas on subjectivity.

According to Lacan, all human subjects experience an inherent *lack*, a lack of 'the wholeness and completeness of the self.'[2] This lack arises after what Lacan calls the mirror stage, where an infant experiences their own body and being as a complete unity, separate from others, for the first time. However, according to Lacan, this image of the infant as a complete, separate being, comes from the outside, it is external to the infant. Thus, there is an ongoing dichotomy in the infant's subjectivity, continuing throughout the person's life, where its internal subjectivity is shaped by external sources, resulting in the aforementioned feeling

[1] Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories on the Self from Freud to Haraway* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000), pp. 38-39.
[2] Ibid., p. 42.

of *lack.* Consequently, the subject feels *desire,* the longing for the experience of the completed self, which can never truly be fulfilled.

It is in relation to this *lack* that Lacan's notion of the *objet petit a* is introduced. Translated, the phrase means 'object lower-case o', where the 'o' stands for other, *autre* in French. The term, also called object cause of desire, denotes the fantasy surrounding any object or achievement a subject may desire. Implicit in the fantasy is the belief that, should the individual acquire what they desire, they will be closer to being the complete and autonomous subject they imagined in the mirror stage. However, according to Lacan, returning to that state is impossible, as every object or achievement acquired will always be external, making the fantasy of an autonomous, coherent subject impossible. Nevertheless, the subject will keep on seeking completion, and desire will slip onto something new. Because of this, Lacan likens desire to metonymy, in that it always slips further along the chain of signification.

This thesis will then explore how the notion of *objet petit a* is related to love, as represented in the novels *The Color Purple*, *Poor Things* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In his book *Lacan on Love,* Bruce Fink picks up on Lacan's notion that 'love is giving what you don't have'.[3] Further, Fink argues that, in a couple, the lover gives 'his lack of something', and that to 'love someone else is to convey in words to that person that we lack – preferably big time – and that he or she is intimately related to that lack.'[4] Thus, taking Lacanian theory at face value, a romantic partner can be interpreted as simultaneously taking the role of, and putting their mate in the place of, the objet petit a. Although, as Kirshner A. Lewis writes, '[i]t should be obvious that actual loving relationships between partners cannot

[3] Bruce Fink, *Lacan on Love: An Exploration of Lacan's Seminar VIII, Transference* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 35.
[4] Ibid., pp. 35-36.

be explained by an abstract concept like the *objet petit a*', the notion can be used as a deconstruction of romantic attraction, offering a partial explanation as to why one feels more attracted to a certain person and not to another. [5] Furthermore, as the background chapter will explain, the Lacanian subject is constituted through language. Hence, examining fictional characters and representations of their attractions through the paradigm of the *objet petit a* helps explore why the characters have these particular attractions. Also, as the novels are arguably a part of an ongoing discourse about love and attraction, they are influential in how love and attraction is perceived today, they may affect the reader's *objet petit a*. Moreover, since a fictional relationship is arguably built only on the actual text, it is much more accessible than a genuine relationship, as every certain detail of a fictional relationship exists on the page.

The reason for examining love specifically in the novels *The Color Purple, Poor Things,* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is that the relationships described in these novels encompass different configurations of class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and culture. Furthermore, each novel presents original ideas on relationships. *The Color Purple* features several variations on polyamorous couples. *Poor Things* portrays contrasting narratives presented by each partner in a marriage. And *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* depicts a character obsessed by the thought of entering a relationship and losing his virginity, while lacking the ability to do so. This thesis will use Lacan's paradigm to offer a unique exploration of why the characters in the aforementioned novels experience romantic attractions the way they do, and how said attractions relate to the subjectivities of the different characters.

[5] Lewis A. Kirshner, 'Rethinking Desire: The objet petit a in Lacanian Theory', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 53, 1 (2005), 83-102, p. 85.

Lacan's Theories on Subjectivity

While Lacan is mostly known for being a psychoanalyst, his theories overlap with cultural and literary criticism. As this background will go on to explain, the Lacanian subject is 'subject only from being subjected to the field of the Other', and the Lacanian notion of the Other is in turn 'the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject'.[6] Accordingly, the Lacanian subject is constituted by signifiers, and fictitious characters may be approached as subjects through the signifiers used to create them, opening up for an analysis of the representation of romantic desire, and thus the notion of the *objet petit a*. However, before such an analysis can be made, a thorough understanding of Lacan's ideas and terminology relating to subjectivity is necessary. Hence, this chapter will provide an overview of Lacan's ideas about subjectivity and desire.

In contrast to a thinker like Freud, who introduces new terms in order to discuss his ideas, Lacan tends to utilise already existing words and gives them new meaning in order to form his theory, causing his ideas to seem enigmatic at best and inaccessible at worst if approached without an understanding of his basic terms. It is also worth noting that according to Australian philosopher Nick Mansfield, 'Lacan's writing is notorious for its ambiguity and its intentional obscurity', and therefore one cannot take for granted that any of his ideas can be straightforwardly explained.[7] Hence, as Lacan's texts are notoriously difficult to comprehend, there is a lack of consensus amongst critics on the interpretation of his ideas. Nonetheless, in order to fully understand the term *objet petit a*, an understanding of Lacan's three different orders of the psyche is necessary, which he names the 'Real', the 'Imaginary' and the 'Symbolic'. These three terms are also related to Lacan's use of the term 'desire',

[6] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973), ed. Jacques Alain-Miller (London: Karnac, 2010), pp. 188, 203.
[7] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, p. 38.

which is also highly relevant to the *objet petit a*. Lastly, it is also useful to have an understanding of the 'petit a', or 'lower-case other', in the *objet petit a*, and of how it differs from Lacan's idea of Other with a capital O, in order to fully comprehend the term.

Of Lacan's three theoretical orders of the psyche, the Real is the least important for understanding his notion of the *objet petit a*, and hence it is also the least important for this dissertation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have some understanding of the Real in order to understand the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Fink describes the Real as 'that which is not only currently unsymbolized but *unsymbolizable.*'[8] The Real is then that which cannot be accessed by language, and is thus the psychological order of an infant that does not yet have the ability to understand language. Alternatively, it could be understood as the prediscursive subject, forever inaccessible once a subject integrates language, filtering all experiences through the lens of significations. Fink likens the Real to the Freudian concept of drives.[9] Thus, the Real, as a concept, is closely related to Freud's idea of the id, and the subconscious itself.

The second, and more relevant of Lacan's three orders for the purpose of this dissertation is the Imaginary. As Fink points out, 'Lacan is impressed early on in his career by the *formative role of images* in the animal kingdom.'[10] In his essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', Lacan writes:

> it is a necessary condition for the maturation of the gonad of the female pigeon that it should see another member of its species, of either sex; so sufficient in itself is this condition that the desired effect may be obtained merely by placing the individual within reach of the field of reflection of a mirror. Similarly, in the case of the migratory locust, the transition within a generation from the solitary to the

[8] Fink, *Lacan on Love*, p. 94, emphasis in original.
[9] Ibid., p. 101.
[10] Ibid., p. 62, emphasis in original.

> gregarious form can be obtained by exposing the individual, at a certain stage, to the exclusively visual action of a similar image, provided it is animated by movements of a style sufficiently close to that characteristic of the species.[11]

Lacan thus points out the importance of images for triggering processes of sexual and social maturity in other species. Fink goes even further, bringing in the importance of images for certain animals, such as dogs and lions, in order to judge the strength and aggression of another member of its species, whilst other species, such as the argus pheasant and the peacock, base their choice of mate on the appearance of the other.[12] Lacan's emphasis on the role of the image in developing a human subjectivity is therefore informed by his understanding of similar reactions in other species.

According to Lacan, humans differ from animals in terms of the processes related to developing and maturing. Lacan writes that the signs of 'uneasiness and motor unco-ordination [sic] of the neo-natal months', as well as the 'anatomical incompleteness of the pyramidal system' of the central nervous system, confirms 'the fact of a real *specific prematurity of birth* in man', a 'fact' he claims is recognised by embryologists 'by the term *foetalization*'.[13] What is important for Lacan is that during the first several months of human life, coordination skills are underdeveloped to the point that the infant does not act as a complete entity; it does not understand the limits of its body, nor does it recognise the difference between itself and the external world. It is only at the advent of what Lacan calls the 'mirror stage' that the infant first experiences itself as a coherent subjectivity, separate from the external world.

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[11] Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' (1949), in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch and others (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 1163-1169, p. 1165.
[12] Fink, *Lacan on Love*, pp. 63-67.
[13] Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', p. 1166, emphasis in original.

According to Lacan, when the child enters the mirror stage, usually between the age of six and eighteen months, the child comes to identify with an assumed image:

> 'This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child […] would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the Symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.'[14]

In other words, Lacan claims that the mirror stage is when the child first recognises its own subjectivity, prior to language giving the child the function of the *I*, and it is this notion of subjectivity as based on an external image that he calls the *Imaginary.* It is important to note, with Fink, that the ego, or sense of self can 'be formed without any mirrors around', proposing that '[p]arents can also be understood to function as mirrors in certain ways, as can siblings'.[15] Bert Olivier similarly suggests that the role of the mirror can be taken on by 'a parent's gaze or remark reflecting something about one's body, for instance: "Look at Jack's (or Jill's) strong little body", or: "With those legs you will run like the wind!"'[16] Ultimately, the mirror stage can be assumed to stem from any interaction that gives a child a sense of coherent subjectivity, separate from everything else.

Although the child now has unified sense of self, Fink points out the deception involved: the mirror image 'idealizes the child's body: it suggests that it is capable of things which it is not yet capable', making 'its body seem unified and coordinated like he bodies of the child's far more capable powerful, parents or older siblings.'[17] Hence, the image of the

[14] Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', p. 1164, emphasis in original.
[15] Fink, *Lacan on Love*, p. 70.
[16] Bert Olivier, 'Lacan's subject: the Imaginary, language, the real and Philosophy', *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 23, 1 (2004), 1-19, p. 4.
[17] Fink, *Lacan on Love*, p. 69.

self in the Imaginary is an idealised one. Lacan says that 'the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone', implying that the subjectivity perceived in the Imaginary is always a fantasy.[18] The individual's self-perception, and the Imaginary, is thus always centred, according to Lacan, on an idealised version of itself that can never be fully realised.

Furthermore, this identification with a form in a mirror is highly alienating, Lacan argues, as it is an external image projected onto the child's subjectivity. Lacan writes: '[t]he fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *Gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted', and that 'the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, […] will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development'.[19] Central to Lacanian theory is the idea of the consistently alienated self. Fink goes on to argue that all identification is alienating, as he writes:

> To call it an identification implies that it is an identification with something else – that is, something that is not initially thought to be the same as me. To establish that two objects are identical, that is, to bring about an identification of one with the other, they first have to be experienced as nonidentical. This something else with which I identify is an other. I become alienated from "myself" insofar as I bring this image in the mirror or foreign fiction into myself. [20]

Thus, in Lacanian theory, any identification is a paradox: it is a way for an individual to define themself by pointing to something exterior to themself, something other, something

[18] Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', p. 1165.
[19] Ibid., pp. 1165-1166.
[20] Fink, *Lacan on Love*, p. 70.

that they are not. Furthermore, in individuals, the contradiction of self-identification through external elements causes alienation from the self.

Lacan's third order of the psyche is the Symbolic. Mansfield sums up the idea of the Symbolic order as '[t]he system of meanings and identities from which your selfhood derives'.[21] Specifically, the Symbolic refers to the system of language, and, to some extent, culture. Lacan insists that any identification through language is external, 'because language and its structure exist prior to the moment at which each subject at a certain point in his mental development makes him entry to it'.[22] Since language existed before the individual, it is an external construct that the individual has henceforth to navigate in order to be a part of society. Mansfield suggests how language, as a structure of signifiers, operates similarly in relation to the self as the mirror stage:

> The self's mirror-image of itself that it had discovered in the Imaginary finds its archetype in the signifier. The word 'I', for example, provides an image of the self, but only when that selfhood concedes its meaning and definition to the system of signification, of which the signifier 'I' is a part. The Imaginary unity it seems to provide is sucked away by its alien nature, the fact that it is part of a system that pre-exists the subject, that other subjects also use, and over which no individual subject has control. The subject's sense of itself is lost in the very field of signs that seemed to provide it in the first place.[23]

Mansfield thus argues that since all definitions and significations happen on the basis of language, an alien element to the initial subject, all identification comes from outside the subject. Hence, all identification, especially identification through language, is also an

[21] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, p. 43.
[22] Jacques Lacan, 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious' (1957), in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch and others (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 1169-1181, p. 1169.
[23] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, pp. 43-44.

alienation of the self, as the identification comes from someone or something foreign to the self. Lacan argues that the induction of a child into the Symbolic order happens as the mirror stage ends, at 'the deflection of the specular *I* into the social *I*', a moment which 'inaugurates, by the identification with the *imago* of the counterpart […], the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations.'[24] In this manner, Lacan suggests that the assumption of the linguistic I is brought on through its being necessary in order for a subject to function socially.

Lacan goes on to argue that once a subject enters the Symbolic order, in order to be able to communicate and act in cooperation with others, the individual subjectivity has to be mediated through language. According to Lacan, an individual's entrance into the Symbolic is the 'moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other' and 'constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others'.[25] Human knowledge, then, only stretches as far as existing signifiers, as humans are only able to experience reality through the 'abstract equivalences' of objects, as created by language. Kirshner elaborates on this idea, saying:

> For Lacan, human culture (the Symbolic order) creates a break from the biological real, capturing and restructuring the experience of life through mediating symbols. The body, for example, is conceptualized and organized by labels and categories that under ordinary circumstances stand in the way of any direct experience of its existence.[26]

Thus, for Lacan, the symbolic order pierces each human experience, leaving its tint on each object and each experience, conceivably obscuring each one in the process. It is important to

[24] Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', p. 1167, emphasis in original.
[25] Ibid., p. 1168.
[26] Kirshner, 'Rethinking Desire', p. 86.

point out, though, that Lacan does in no way advocate getting rid of the Symbolic order altogether, or claim that one is better off without it. Instead, the Symbolic Order makes it possible for individuals to have a subjectivity and infer meaning. In other words, Lacan essentially points out that the Symbolic order also has its flaws. Alenka Zupančič compares the situation to the Oedipus myth, saying that humans are 'born into a pre-existing Symbolic constellation in which we must recognize the significance of our being'.[27] In that sense, the 'Symbolic constellation' of human culture is unavoidable, and it opens up space for signification.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Lacan defines the Other as the locus of the signification chain that administers what can be made present of the subject, paraphrasing it as 'the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear.'[28] As the Other is a locus of the signification chain, it is clearly evocative of language. Lacan says:

> The effects of language are always mixed with the fact, which is the basis of the analytic experience, that the subject is subject only from being subjected to the field of the Other, the subject proceeds from his synchronic subjection in the field of the Other.[29]

Thus, the Other is where the Lacanian subject manifests itself through language. Hence, the Other evokes the Symbolic, and, like the Symbolic, the subject has to approach the Other without fully understanding it, in order to advance into human culture. Accordingly, in order to become a subject, individuals have to express themselves through language in the field of the Other, which creates for the literary critic the possibility of using Lacan's ideas to analyse fictional subjects. While Lacan uses his ideas in a mostly psychotherapeutic context, never

[27] Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (2000) (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 175-176.
[28] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 203.
[29] Ibid., p. 188.

fully extending his ideas to a broader application, this dissertation extends Lacan's notion of the Other to include the presence of culture and society embedded in the Symbolic.

Lacan distinguishes between the capitalised Other and the non-capitalised other. Mari Ruti writes that the Other 'is not, of course, synonymous with the "other" (the other person). Yet there is no Other without a multitude of others, so that it is impossible to completely dissociate the concepts from each other.'[30] Some scholars have pointed out that the other can also be associated with the mirror image, or any counterpart to the self.[31] Essentially, an other can be identified with, whereas the Other is always separate and inaccessible.

Mansfield relates Lacan's idea of the *objet petit a* to the Other by suggesting that the *objet petit a* denotes every 'small transitory object that we mistake for the Other', and that these objects are 'mere substitutes for the huge and miraculous Other hovering on the horizon of human possibility'.[32] The *objet petit a* can then be thought of as an attribute attached to a chain of objects, each one offering a promise that can never be fulfilled. However, different theorists interpret the *objet petit a* differently. What they tend to agree on is that the *objet petit a* denotes the cause for desire.[33] Hence, *the objet petit a* is obviously not an actual object, but some fantasy attached to objects, people, events and achievements. Furthermore, Lacan says that desire is the desire of the Other, which can be interpreted, following Ruti, as meaning both 'that we want to be desired by the Other' and also 'that we learn to desire what (we think that) the Other desires (or wants us to desire).'[34] Lacan writes:

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[30]Mari Ruti, 'Reading Lacan as a Social Critic', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 17, 1 (2012), 69-81, p. 80.

[31] Vincent B. Leitch and others, 'Jacques Lacan', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch and others (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 1156-1163, p. 1161.

[32] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, p. 46.

[33] Dany Nobus, 'That obscure object of psychoanalysis', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 46, 2 (2013), 163-187, p. 176,
Kirshner, 'Rethinking Desire', p. 83,
Fink, *Lacan on Love*, pp. 48-51.

[34] Ruti, 'Reading Lacan', p. 75.

> A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse. In the intervals of the discourse of the Other, there emerges in the experience of the child something that is radically mappable, namely, He is saying this to me, but what does he want? […] It is there that what we call desire crawls, slips, escapes, like a ferret.[35]

Lacan thus argues that desire arises from a lack in the Other, and from the child being unable to figure out what it is that Other wants. However, Mansfield argues that Lacan's definition of desire is the 'longing for self-completion' that a subject found briefly in the imaginary upon recognising its mirror image in the mirror stage.[36] Kirshner, on the other hand, argues that because 'the Symbolic order always falls short of totally capturing lived experience,' and is unable to 'totally encompass its referents and represent fully what has been lost', desire is desire for 'the pure reality behind representation'.[37] Following Kirshner's arguments, desire still stems from the Other, insofar as the Other is related to the Symbolic order, yet it stems from the disconnect between Symbolic representation and reality instead of the subject questioning its place in the Other, or the subject's longing for self-completion.

However, it could be said that all these different takes on desire are symptoms of the same problem. The subject encounters a lack in the Other, not understanding what the Other demands of it, through the inability of the Symbolic to capture pure reality. Hence, the subject longs for the time when the Other seemed to offer the subject a complete understanding of itself, i.e. for the mirror stage. Furthermore, the subject looks for self-completion through acquiring symbolic conquests as approved by the Other. Kirshner writes:

[35] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts,* p. 214.
[36] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, p. 45.
[37] Kirshner, 'Rethinking Desire', p. 86.

> we substitute fantasies of sexual, romantic, narcissistic, or material accomplishment that stitch desire to the fabric of social reality, and we convince ourselves that we will be satisfied by realizing them. Desire thus becomes […] diverted to existing Symbolic objects.[38]

It is in the expectation that each of these Symbolic objects can satisfy desire that the *objet petit a* resides. Furthermore, if desire is the Other's desire, the Other is thus the author of the subject's desire, directing it towards certain approved ideals. Kirshner therefore writes that 'desire is accepted as a valued aspect of the human condition, provided it remains within the bounds of Symbolic reality', and that culture 'provides a range of Symbolic objects, which it legitimizes.'[39] In this way, Lacanian theory offers an explanation for why certain ideals are more sought after and socially accepted than others. However, as previously mentioned, Lacan tends to limit his ideas to a psychotherapeutic setting. This dissertation will expand on the notion of the Other's desire to consider the extent to which the expectations of society and culture are embedded in language. Furthermore, Lacan's dynamic of desire and subjectivity has been built on and paralleled by other thinkers. Lacan's influence can be traced, for example, in Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, exploring 'how gendered identity is socially produced through repetitions'.[40] Similarly, Lacan has also influenced Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation, explaining how capitalist ideology perpetuates itself through state apparatuses, making 'individuals "subjects" of the dominant social order.'[41] While these theorists explore subjectivity as constructed by society in a broader context than

[38] Kirshner, 'Rethinking Desire'p. 87.
[39] Ibid., p. 87.
[40] Vincent B. Leitch and others, 'Judith Butler', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch and others (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010) pp. 2536-2539, p. 2536.
[41] Vincent B. Leitch and others, 'Louis Althusser', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, (See Leitch, above), pp. 1332-1335, p. 1333.

Lacan, Lacan's paradigm offers a more intimate analysis, putting the individual in the foreground and society in the background.

It is important to point out that Lacan's theory is not created as an attempt to encourage subjects to conform to the ideal presented by the Other. As Ruti writes, Lacan 'repeatedly asserts that the aim of analysis is not social adaptation (reconciliation to the desire of the Other) but, quite the contrary, the truth of the subject's desire.'[42] Accordingly, Lacan encourages subjects to separate their own actual desires from the ideals created by the Other. Ruti argues that '[i]ronically, one of the most effective ways to do so is to claim for ourselves some of the agency of the signifier that usually belongs to the Other.'[43] The way to take control of one's own desire, according to Lacan, is thus to take agency over signification, and to be sceptical towards the desire of the Other.

As Lacanian theory is generally used in a psychotherapeutic setting, this dissertation is unconventional in that it does not use psychoanalysis to diagnose the examined characters. Instead, this dissertation uses Lacanian psychoanalysis as a paradigm for exploring the depth in representations of love and attractions, relating it to the subjectivities of the different characters. Accordingly, relating the *objet petit a* to love makes it possible to explore how a character's romantic attractions are connected to their subjectivity. As the *objet petit a* denotes the cause of a subject's desire, and because Lacanian desire is metonymic, the *objet* allows for exploration of how a subject's romantic desires are related to the rest of their desires.

Furthermore, if a subject is still in the clutches of the Other's desire, they will arguably find the *objet petit a* in partners whom they believe match the ideals presented by their culture. Alternatively, interpreting the Other's desire as wanting to be desired, a subject could

[42] Ruti, 'Reading Lacan', p. 75.
[43] Ibid., p. 76.

equate the *objet petit a* with a relationship that narcissistically allows them to maintain an image of themselves as desirable. Lacan would arguably encourage subjects to try to avoid both of these approaches to relationships, and instead urge subjects to take agency over signification, and subsequently create their own set of values. Such empowered subjects would associate the *objet petit a* with other subjects whom they believe to encompass those values. Furthermore, Lacan would argue that since desire can never fully be satisfied, but only transfer to new Symbolic objects, one should reject the idea that the right partner should end all desire for other partners, which is not to say that monogamy is unreasonable. Lacan would warn against trying to find a partner as a way to bring one's ideal self from the Imaginary into being, trying to reach a stage of completeness through the other, and instead accept the reality of one's partner as a separate entity.

Patriarchy and Celie's Desire for Being Good in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is a suitable novel for discussing ideas relating to romantic love, as the novel depicts several different romantic couples. Some critics, such as Candice Marie Jenkins, argue for the influence of patriarchy over the relationships between male and female characters in the novel, and this dissertation agrees with those arguments.[44] Furthermore, some critics, such as Daniel W. Ross, emphasise and analyse the supportive network between black women in the novel.[45] This chapter will only bring in that analysis when it is relevant to the topic of romantic relationships. Moreover, this chapter will focus the relationships between Celie and Shug Avery, between Shug and Albert, and between Harpo and his partners Sofia and Mary Agnes. Although the novel depicts other relationships, such as that between Nettie and Samuel, the novel does not go into sufficient detail about the dynamics of these relationships to offer grounds for a Lacanian or any other psychoanalytical reading. This chapter will examine how Shug Avery embodies Celie's *objet petit a*, consequently causing Celie to perceive herself in a more positive way. Furthermore, this chapter will also examine how the Other's desire influences some of the heterosexual relationships in the novel, particularly in relation to gender expectations.

In his essay 'Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple'*, Charles L. Proudfit uses psychoanalytic theory to argue that the motivation for Celie's relationship with Shug comes from the lack of a mother. Celie does indeed compare Shug to her mother. Upon first seeing Shug on a picture, Celie thinks '[s]he more pretty than my mama'; later, when Shug comes to stay in Albert's house, Celie

[44] Candice Marie Jenkins, 'Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple'*, *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 48, 4 (2002), 969-1000.
[45] Daniel W. Ross, 'Celie in the Looking Glass: The Desire for Selfhood in *The Color Purple*', *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 34, 1 (1988), 69-84.

remarks that Shug is 'sicker than my mama was when she die. But she more evil than my mama and that keep her alive.'[46] While Celie associates Shug with her mother, she also asserts their difference, stating she is prettier, sicker and more evil than her mother. When Celie sits in between Albert and Shug, facing Albert's brother Tobias, she remarks '[f]or the first time in my life, I feel just right'; later, towards the end of the novel, Celie notices how 'sitting on the porch with Albert and Shug feel real pleasant.'[47] Following these accounts, Proudfit argues:

> These adult experiences of Celie's are pleasurable as they are unconsciously experienced as that loving relationship she had with her preoedipal father and mother during the latter part of her first two years of life. They help fulfill the need that has remained for such family object relations since the early separations.[48]

However, comparing Albert to a preoedipal father and saying he fulfils the need for family object relations, at least up until the very end of the novel, completely ignores the hostile way he treats Celie. While Proudfit gives an extended account of how Shug and Albert possibly help develop Celie's psyche, he does not analyse Celie's romantic attractions.

Celie also uses several other comparisons for her relationship with Shug. Although there are plenty of comparisons made to her own mother, Celie also likens Shug to her own children, like when they have sex the first time, writing '[t]hen I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth', or like when she tends Shug's hair, remarking 'I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia'.[49] Likely, it is easy for Celie to compare Shug to her children, because they are amongst the few people Celie really cares

[46] Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982) (New York: Harcourt, 1992) pp. 6, 47.
[47] Ibid., pp. 57, 285.
[48] Charles L. Proudfit, 'Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple'*, *Contemporary Literature*, 32, 1(91), 12-37, pp. 21-22.
[49] Walker, *The Color Purple*, pp. 53, 113.

for. Similarly, Celie compares Shug to her sister Nettie, writing that sleeping next to Shug is a little 'like sleeping with Nettie, only sleeping with Nettie never feel this good.'[50] Celie arguably compares Shug to her own female relatives, not only because these are the people for whom she cares, but also because they are the only people to whom she relates on a personal level; they are the only people she identifies with on what Lacan terms the Imaginary level. Prior to meeting Shug, it seems the only people reflecting an image of Celie to herself are her relatives. Hence, it is natural for Celie to compare Shug to her own family members.

It should be noted that Celie is unable to identify herself with Albert's children, even though she takes care of them. She writes:

> I be good to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. It more like patting another piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferove. Anyhow, they don't love me neither, no matter how good I is.[51]

Celie's dramatic refusal or inability to feel anything for Albert's children is arguably because they remind her that she lost her own children, and that she is an outsider in her new home. Hence, Celie completely distances herself from them, even though these are people with whom she interacts with on a daily basis. Similarly, it does take Celie a while to identify with Sofia. This is likely due to Sofia looking down on Celie, as proven by Celie writing 'I think bout how every time I jump when Mr. _____ call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me.'[52] Celie clearly seems guarded when it comes to identifying with people, which is not surprising, considering her traumatic life. As a result, during the first half of the novel, she fails to develop her selfhood in any meaningful way, and, as Daniel W. Ross writes, for most

[50] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 114.
[51] Ibid., p. 29.
[52] Ibid., p. 36.

of the novel Celie 'exists without a self or identity.'[53] Arguably, Celie's alleged lack of self stems from not having anyone to take on the role of the mirror in Lacan's notion of the mirror stage, thus never having her own image reflected in her surroundings. As Celie does not have many people to identify with, Shug has a very high impact on Celie's selfhood when they first start to associate.

For the first part of the novel, Celie clearly seems to want to present an identity only when Shug is involved. The only instance where Celie makes claims about herself is when she writes 'I am fourteen years old', draws a line through the words 'I am', and writes 'I have always been a good girl.'[54] This passage, in particular the crossed out words 'I am[a good girl]', suggests that Celie has lost her identity, that she cannot believe in her ideal self as presented by the Imaginary. This is likely due to the abuse she suffers from her stepfather, as Proudfit points out that 'the child victim of rape and incest often blames herself for her trauma; or, worse still, believes that this bad thing has happened to her because *she* is bad and therefore deserves it.'[55] Consequently, Celie struggles to form an identity, as she seems to believe she has done something very bad, yet cannot understand what. When trying to define herself, she considers only what other people say about her, as when she writes 'I know I'm not as pretty or as smart as Nettie, but she say I ain't dumb.'[56] Celie clearly doubts her own judgements about herself.

It is only when encountering Shug that Celie starts expressing and exploring her identity. Celie writes early on that she 'don't have nothing', she does not own anything nice, so when Albert's sister Kate convinces him to buy a new dress for Celie, she immediately 'think[s] what color Shug Avery would wear.'[57] When given the opportunity to create her

[53] Ross, 'Celie in the Looking Glass', p. 69.
[54] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 1.
[55] Proudfit, 'Celie's Search for Identity', p. 17.
[56] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 9.
[57] Ibid., pp. 3, 20.

identity, Celie wants to shape herself in the image of Shug. Although Celie is indisputably infatuated by Shug, and could therefore be motivated by the desire to be liked by Shug, there are also critics who suggest Celie wants to become Shug. Ross, for example, writes that 'Celie begins to fantasize about Shug before her own marriage. During the fantasy period Shug becomes Celie's ego ideal'.[58] Shug being Celie's ego ideal is not that odd, considering that when Celie first sees her picture, Shug is wearing rouge, with styled hair, and next to 'somebody motocar.'[59] The fact that Shug represents beauty, glamour and wealth, in a way Celie might have never seen before, establishes her as an ideal for Celie.

Reading Celie as desiring to become Shug certainly brings a new light to Celie's wedding night with Albert, when Celie thinks 'I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him.'[60] Kevin Everod Quashie argues that in this scene, Celie exhibits both her own self and that of Shug:

> [Celie] thinking about Shug brings her closer to her own self, for she recognizes the sameness of her and Shug (both having lain with Albert). The gesture of affection she makes is not toward Albert, who is barely an object in Celie's reverie, but instead toward herself, toward Shug, and toward the growing union between her and Shug (a union that is at least partially Celie's creation, especially in this fantasy moment). Celie is acting like, even becoming, Shug in putting her arms around Albert […] as well as pretending to put her arms around Shug (imagining Shug as the body that replaces Albert's). [61]

[58] Ross, 'Celie in the Looking Glass', p. 76.
[59] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 6.
[60] Ibid., p. 12.
[61] Kevin Everod Quashi, 'The Other Dancer as Self: Girlfriend Selfhood in Toni Morrison's SuIa and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple'*, *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, 2, 1 (2001), 187-217, p. 195.

Shug thus represents Celie's *objet petit a* in two ways, not only because Celie possibly desires to *be* Shug, but also because Celie's fantasy of Shug helps her to establish her own selfhood.

Although Shug keeps bringing Celie closer to her ideal self, Celie seems to quickly realise their separateness. Upon meeting Shug, Celie claims that there is a certain wickedness to Shug. After their first encounter, Celie reports that Shug's eyes are mean, and that 'sick as she is, if a snake cross her path, she kill it'; Celie also suggests that her wickedness is what keeps her from succumbing to her sickness.[62] The way that Celie perceives this wickedness as intrinsic to Shug's character is arguably a very important turning point. Since Celie believes (as already noted) that the abuse she experienced at the hands of her stepfather happened due to her not being a 'good girl' anymore, aligning herself with someone considered to be evil would feel like setting herself up for more abuse. And Celie seems to have less sympathy for Shug during the beginning of Shug's stay at Albert's house. She writes 'Ain't nothing wrong with Shug Avery. She just sick. Sicker than anybody I ever seen.'[63] Celie's statements seem contradictory; saying someone is very sick, yet that there is nothing wrong with them does not make sense. Instead, the text seems to suggest a lack of sympathy.

Even though Celie is still attracted to her and confesses to Albert that she wants Shug to stay, there is a brief period where she seems very distant to Shug; during their first reported conversation, Celie even calls her 'ma'am', an impersonal denotation of authority, suggesting that Celie approaches Shug the same way she approaches Albert and Alphonso, who both dominate her and cause her suffering.[64] Furthermore, the novel also offers the narrative of Annie Julia, Celie's precursor as Albert's wife. Shug reveals that Annie Julia was forgotten by

[62] Walker, *The Color Purple*, pp. 46-47.
[63] Ibid., p. 47.
[64] Ibid., pp. 47-48.

her family once she got married, that Albert would beat her, and that Shug deliberately caused her pain; the scene of her murder, revealed in Harpo's dream, shows her being shot by her boyfriend, who tells her 'you ain't got no place.'[65] As Celie also has no family, apart from Nettie, and is being treated similarly by Albert, Annie Julia's story serves as a foreshadowing of what could have happened to Celie, which is dying without place and identity. The reason their narratives reach different conclusions, and the reason Shug stays in the position of *objet petit a* for Celie, is because Shug stops being evil to Celie.

During the first reported exchange between Shug and Celie, two things happen that make it possible for Celie and Shug to start bonding, and for Celie to keep Shug in the position of the *objet petit a*. The first is that Shug tells Celie 'don't you yes ma'am me, I ain't that old.'[66] In refusing to identify with that marker of authority, 'ma'am', Shug signals that she and Celie are equals, even implying that they should be on a first name basis. The other thing that happens is that Shug asks Celie about her children, and reveals that she has children of her own.[67] By doing this, Shug not only shows a mild interest in Celie, giving Celie an opportunity to talk about who she is, she also establishes that they have something in common, allowing Celie to easily identify with her. Thus, Shug maintains her place in Celie's Imaginary, helping Celie to get closer to her ideal self by identifying with her. Furthermore, this identification allows Celie to see Shug as something other than evil. Without this identification it would be impossible for Celie to sustain Shug as an ideal, making it harder for Celie to keep feeling the same levels of attraction towards Shug.

Celie also reveals her aversion to Shug's evilness through connecting it to her illness. On the day the family is visited by Albert's brother, Celie writes 'Shug halfway tween sick

[65] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 28, 122.
[66] Ibid., p. 49.
[67] Ibid., pp. 49-50.

and well. Halfway tween good and evil, too. Most days now she show me and Mr. _____ her good side. But evil all over her today. She smile, like a razor opening.'[68] Celie thus suggests that, as Shug has started to recover, she has gone from being pure evil to being only half evil, thus implying that her wickedness is a temporary quality, like being sick, and that it can also be cured. And Celie does indeed stop describing Shug as evil after she has fully recovered from her illness.

The most important way in which Shug influences Celie's Imaginary happens when she tells Celie 'I won't leave […] until I know Albert won't even think about beating you.'[69] This act is arguably the first time when Celie can truly feel like she is good again, after first sustaining abuse from her stepfather. As previously stated, the abuse makes her believe she is not a good girl anymore. However, when Alphonso starts 'looking at' Nettie, wanting to rape her too, Celie shows a unprecedented display of agency by getting 'in his light'; she even dresses up in 'horsehair, feathers and a pair of […] high heel shoes.'[70] This behaviour is very uncharacteristic for Celie, who otherwise tends to do only as she is told. Her motivation is undoubtedly compassion for her sister. In shielding her from abuse, she not only shields her from the pain, but she also allows Nettie to maintain the image of being good, something she is unable to herself. By getting in the way of Alphonso, she proves that Nettie's well-being is worth preserving, and Nettie can see herself in a positive light. In other words, she lets Nettie stay close to her ideal self in the Imaginary. Although Shug does not make them same sacrifice as Celie, she still returns the image of being a good girl to Celie when she says she will stop Albert from beating her. By making him stop his abuse she offers an image to Celie where she does not deserve the beatings, and also, by extension, the abuse from her stepfather.

[68] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 57.
[69] Ibid., 75.
[70] Ibid., pp. 3, 5, 7.

This brings her back to the narrative of 'I am a good girl' that she crosses out in the opening of the novel. In this way, Shug Avery takes an even stronger role as Celie's *objet petit a*.

An interesting aspect of Celie's attraction to Shug is that it seems to go against the Other's desire. As described in the background chapter, the Other's desire denotes the Lacanian subject both desiring to be desired, and desiring what it believes the Other desires, diverted to Symbolic objects. This dissertation also extends the term to include social and cultural expectations expressed through language, Lacan's Symbolic order. When Albert's sisters discuss his first wife, they say she is '[n]ot so pretty', as she is 'too black', then go on to remark that Shug is 'as black as [a] shoe.'[71] Shug is also not very popular in Celie's community. The congregation at her church, as well as the preacher, express hostility towards Shug, with the preacher going on to 'talk bout a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner.'[72] Considering the important place that God has for Celie throughout most of the novel, it is surprising how resistant she is to the opinion of the church. An answer as to why she resists the opinion of the community could be found in her attitude towards the patriarchs in her life. Celie writes 'I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them.'[73] From that account, it is clear that Celie is scared of men in general. Quashi writes '[f]or Celie, women represent a possibility of being girlfriends, thereby being engaged by an/other in a way that does not violate and render her abject, nor fill her with fear as do relationships with some Black men and most white people.'[74] Thus, Quashi implies that Celie's opinion of men and white people is that they

[71] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 20.
[72] Ibid., p. 44.
[73] Ibid., p. 5.
[74] Quashi, 'The Other Dancer as Self', p. 197.

either violate her, reduce her to something abject, or scare her. Likely, her alienation from these fears make her less susceptible to conforming to the desire of these people.

Similarly, the fear and alienation Celie experiences from men could be supposed to be the reason for her lesbianism. Ross writes that '[t]he process of discovering or developing desire begins, for Celie, with the reappropriation of her own body, which was taken from her by men—first by her brutal stepfather and then passed on to her husband, Albert.'[75] Celie does not only feel alienated from men, but men, represented by Alphonso and Albert, have alienated Celie from her own body, thereby also alienating her from her Imaginary. Celie arguably experiences her body as what Julia Kristeva's calls the abject, which is 'what the subject's consciousness has to expel or disregard in order to create the proper separation between subject and object.'[76] As a result, Celie struggles to discern different men from each other, thinking '[m]ost times mens look pretty much alike to me.'[77] As men do not have the ability to reflect a positive identification back to Celie, she is unable to discern them from each other, and does not get any satisfaction from interacting with them. Either way, Celie's desire seems to be less influenced by the Other's desire than what Lacan suggests is common. This is likely because the Other, represented by her community, has done very little to relieve her from any of the trauma she experiences at the start of the novel.

Furthermore, Celie mostly resists the alternate interpretation of the Other's desire, which is desiring to be desired. She essentially resists what Laura Mulvey terms the male gaze, the masculine gaze which 'projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled

[75] Ross, 'Celie in the Looking Glass', p. 70.
[76] Vincent B. Leitch and others, 'Julia Kristeva', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* ed. Vincent B. Leitch and others (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010) pp. 2067-2071, p. 2069.
[77] Walker, *The Color Purple,* p. 15.

accordingly.'[78] As Celie does not want to be desired by men, she refuses to style herself after their fantasies. Only when Shug is involved does Celie desire to look special. Celie writes:

> Sometimes I think Shug never love me. I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? I ast myself. My hair is short and kinky because I don't straighten it anymore. Once Shug say she love it no need to. My skin dark. My nose just a nose. My lips just lips. My body just any woman's body going through the changes of age. Noting special here for nobody to love. No honey colored curly hair, no cuteness. Nothing young and fresh. […] Celie, I say, happiness was just a trick in your case. Just cause you never had any before Shug, you thought it was time to have some, and that it was gon last. […] When Shug left, happiness desert.[79]

In this passage, Celie places Shug as what Lacan's terms the *objet petit a*. For one, Celie suggests it is impossible for her to be happy without Shug, indicating that Shug has obstructed all the other desires of Celie. Furthermore, by questioning what Shug would love about her, Celie declares herself inadequate to Shug. Even though she points out that Shug once said she loved her hair as it was, Celie also implies there must have been a temporariness to that love, and that she is not worthy of love anymore. Celie clearly believes that without having Shug to love her she is no longer lovable.

However, Celie learns to live without Shug. After a while she admits that she is thankful for what Shug has given her, writing 'she give me so many good years.'[80] Thus, Celie seems to believe that the image of herself that Shug helped has not disappeared just

[78] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, (See Leitch, above) pp. 2084-2095, p. 2088.
[79] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 259.
[80] Ibid., p. 267.

because Shug is not with her anymore. Indeed, Celie seems to have learned that she will be the same person regardless of whether or not she is in a relationship with Shug. Celie writes:

> I wish I could be traveling with her, but thank God she able to do it. Sometimes I feel mad at her. Feel like I could scratch her hair right off her head. But then I think, Shug got a right to live too. She got a right to look over the world in whatever company she choose. Just cause I love her don't take away none of her rights. […] Who am I to tell her who to love? My job just to love her good and true myself.[81]

This is arguably the moment where Shug stops taking on the role of the *objet petit a* for Celie. Although Celie still feels attraction towards her, she seems to love Shug purely for who she is and not for the self-image she enables for Celie. Celie is able to love without needing love in return, which means that her Imaginary ideal is someone who loves rather than someone who is loved.

Unlike Celie, Shug Avery seems much more influenced by the Other's Desire when it comes to whom she chooses as romantic partners. When Shug tells Celie she has fallen for Germaine, she says:

> I have to make you understand. Look, se say. I'm gitting old. I'm fat. Nobody think I'm good looking no more, but you. Or so I thought. He's nineteen. A baby. How long can it last? […] All I ast is six months. Just six months to have my last fling. I got to have it Celie. I'm too weak a woman not to. But if you just give me six months, Celie, I will try to make our life together like it was.[82]

From this passage, Shug makes it clears that she desires to be desired. By being romantically involved with Germaine, she maintains an image of herself as the desirable, because it lets her

[81] Walker, *The Color Purple*, pp. 268-269.
[82] Ibid., p. 250.

see herself as the kind of woman that young, attractive men would find desirable. Furthermore, by saying that Celie is the only one who thinks that she is good looking, she reveals that being loved by Celie does not reflect the same image to her, likely because Celie is neither young, attractive, nor a man; although she feels very close to Celie, Shug does not feel as glamorous as she wants to. Additionally, a romantic relationship between two women, in the cultural context of the novel, would be considered less valid than a heterosexual one, thus not giving Shug the recognition she desires. Shug's desire for heterosexual recognition can further be seen in how she tends to take first Grady and later Germaine with her when she travels, for work or otherwise, yet keeps placing Celie in her home instead. Germaine clearly incorporates the *objet petit a* for Shug, as he enables her to relive her existence as the eligible Queen Honeybee from her earlier days.

Furthermore, in only asking for six months, Shug shows that she is aware that the fantasy she experiences from being with Germaine is only temporary, and that reality will eventually come back to haunt her. Shug tells Celie: 'I love this child and I'm scared to death. He's a third of my age. A third of my size. Even a third of my color. […] You know he gon hurt me worse than I'm hurting you. Don't leave me, please.'[83] Here, Shug implies that when Germaine eventually breaks up with her, she is going to be worse off than before, because then she knows for sure that she is too old to be considered conventionally attractive, and that Germaine's young age and size will highlight the opposite qualities in Shug. The fact that she asks to come back to Celie after six months, and also begs her not to leave, suggests that she knows that the love between her and Celie is deeper and longer lasting, yet the possibility of being with Germaine is too thrilling for her to turn it down. Although she knows it is not what is best for her, her desire, beckoned by the Other's desire, encourages her to pursue this new

[83] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 251.

relationship. Hence, Shug pursues the *objet petit a,* in the form of Germaine, even though she believes more in the relationship she has with Celie.

Initially, Shug and Albert's relationship seems to mostly revolve around their physical attraction for each other. Shug tells Celie:

> I used to go round saying, I don't care who he married to, I'm gonna fuck him. […] And I did, too. Us fuck so much in the open us give fucking a bad name. […] Nature said, You two folks, hook up, cause you a good example of how it sposed to go. I didn't want noting to be able to go against that. [84]

Thus, Shug suggests that the attraction she feels towards Albert is mostly based on some animalistic, sexual magnetism between them, and that the attraction is more based around erotic desire, rather than the Lacanian Symbolic desire for an ideal self. However, Shug's implicit excitement about Albert's body suggests that she perceives an ideal in her sexual relations with Albert. Hence, Shug arguably perceives the *objet petit a* in the strong physical attraction between her and Albert.

Furthermore, Shug's reasons for breaking up with Albert all seem highly related to her Imaginary, in that she cannot fathom that someone she loves can act the way Albert does. Shug tells Celie 'once you told me he beat you, and won't work, I felt different about him. If you was my wife, she say, I'd cover you up with kisses stead of licks, and work hard for you too.'[85] Shug clearly cannot look up to someone she thinks is a bad person. Furthermore, she cannot identify with him, as he incorporates attributes she finds highly unappealing, in this case laziness and malice. While she seemed fine with Albert behaving the same way towards his first wife, she feels differently when it comes to Celie. This is clearly due to her being

[84] Walker, *The Color Purple*, pp. 122-123.
[85] Ibid., p. 109.

closer to Celie, and because she has matured since Albert's first marriage. Albert cannot be Shug's *objet petit a,* because his behaviour is not something with which Shug wants to identify.

Moreover, Shug does confess to Celie that she 'never really wanted Albert for a husband.'[86] This confession implies that Shug found some lack in Albert even before she rejected his behaviour towards Celie. The reason for this can be found in the early days of their relationship. Shug tells Celie that Albert's family was very much against him being with her, saying: 'His daddy told him I'm trash, my mama trash before me. His brother say the same. Albert try to stand up for us, git knock down.'[87] Albert is unable to be exclusively with Shug because he does not have the ability to go against the wishes of his family, suggesting he is not secure enough to defy the Other's desire. Consequently, every time Shug is with him, she is reminded that Albert essentially valued his family's wishes over her. Shug teases Albert for this, saying 'I don't need no weak little boy can't say no to his daddy'.[88] As there is nothing Albert can do to go back and change the fact that he did not choose Shug, she will keep feeling that she is second to his father in importance. Shug has declared that she wants nothing to be able to go against her and Albert's attraction, so she clearly wants to be his first choice, and she cannot achieve this status with him. Becoming Albert's wife after he did not choose her could never make Shug fully satisfied, as the implication attached to being with Albert is that Shug is inferior to his father. Thus, Albert is again unsatisfactory as Shug's *objet petit a*. Until he is willing to stand up to his father and family, making Shug his first priority, the fantasy attached to having him as a husband is tainted.

[86] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 122.
[87] Ibid., p. 122.
[88] Ibid., p. 47.

Harpo is faced with a similar decision to Albert's when it comes to his marriage. After Harpo has married Sofia, Celie thinks about 'how happy he is now', and how 'three years pass and he still whistle and sing.'[89] Initially, Harpo is clearly very satisfied with his marriage to Sofia. Furthermore, Harpo seems to enjoy the domestic sphere, doing tasks traditionally considered feminine, while Sofia prefers doing more masculine manual labour. Sofia tells Celie:

> To tell the truth, he love that part of housekeeping a heap more 'en me. I rather be out in the fields or fooling with the animals. Even chopping wood. But he love cooking and cleaning and doing little things round the house.[90]

However, due to how their relationship contravenes the gender norms of the time, in particular the ones performed by Albert and both his wives, Harpo becomes dissatisfied. Judith Butler would argue that Harpo and Sofia's behaviour does not repeat any gendered behaviour Harpo is familiar with. Consequently, Harpo asks Albert 'what to do to make Sofia mind', adding 'I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk.'[91] As he seems otherwise happy with the relationship, this dissatisfaction does not stem from a want in their relationship, but from the Other's desire for a man to be controlling and a woman to be submissive. In the essay 'Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple'*, Candice Marie Jenkins discusses gender in *The Color Purple*, writing:

> Male characters […] seem to desire control for its own sake—to make a statement about their own capacity to rule in the private sphere. Of course, one reason that this distinction exists is that men's gestures toward respectability through "proper"

[89] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 36.
[90] Ibid., p. 39.
[91] Ibid., p. 35.

> behavior are always externalized—since the behavior that needs reform always seems to belong to women.[92]

Thus, Jenkins points out how, in *The Color Purple*, men's respectability is assumed to be related to the behaviour of the women associated with them. As a result, Harpo worries that he is considered less respectable as a man and a husband because his wife will not completely submit to his will.

When Albert asks if Harpo ever hits Sofia, Celie reports that Harpo denies it, and that he seems embarrassed about it.[93] Although Harpo does not seem to want to hit Sofia, and seems generally happy with their relationship, he believes that it affects him negatively that he does not. Jenkins writes:

> That Harpo is embarrassed to admit to Mr. _____ that he doesn't hit Sofia indicates not simply discomfort with his lack of power over his wife, but shame at being exposed, in front of his own father, as an inadequate patriarch. Rather than being able to interact with his father as an equal, now that he has his own household to dominate, he proves himself incapable of the requisite authority.[94]

Although Harpo loves Sofia, their marriage reveals him to be an inadequate patriarch. As such, Harpo moves away from the Other's desire and his ideal self. Interestingly, the lack is not revealed between him and Sofia, but in an exchange with Albert. In this instance, Albert arguably represents the Other's desire, as he tells Harpo:

[92] Jenkins, 'Queering Black Patriarchy', p. 982.
[93] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 35.
[94] Jenkins, 'Queering Black Patriarchy', p. 980.

> Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating […] Sofia think too much of herself anyway […] She need to be taken down a peg.[95]

Albert implies that Harpo cannot take control of Sofia, and that Sofia thinking too much of herself is a nuisance to the community at large. Harpo does not seem to desire beating Sofia at all, yet Albert imposes this desire upon him. From this moment on, beating and taking control of Sofia becomes the *objet petit a* for Harpo, as gaining control would earn him the status of a successful patriarch in his father's eyes.

Achieving this particular desire becomes the breaking point of Harpo's marriage to Sofia, and his motivation for entering a new one. Sofia eventually leaves him to stay with her sister Odessa, telling Celie: 'I'm getting tired of Harpo […] All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don't want a wife, he want a dog.'[96] Harpo is clearly so focused on fulfilling this particular desire that he cannot focus on much else. This becomes even more apparent when Celie introduces his new girlfriend, Mary Agnes, a 'little yellowish' women who is 'a nice girl' willing to do 'anything Harpo say'; Harpo aptly gives her the nickname Squeak.[97] Being the opposite of Sofia, both in physical appearance and behaviour, she is very easy for Harpo to control, letting him emerge as a successful patriarch, fulfilling the Other's desire, and subsequently Harpo's own. Similarly, Sofia's new boyfriend, Henry Broadnax, does not try to control Sofia at all. When Sofia and Henry turn up at Harpo's juke joint to hear Shug sing, Henry tells Harpo: 'I don't fight Sofia battle […] My job to love her and take her where she want to go.'[98] Henry allows Sofia to be the independent individual she

[95] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 35.
[96] Ibid., p. 64.
[97] Ibid., p. 82.
[98] Ibid., p. 82.

desires to be, thus bringing her closer to her ideal self. Thus, they both choose new partners that act more as the *objet petit a*.

However, the novel makes it clear that Harpo is more attracted to Sofia than to Mary Agnes. When Mary Agnes asks Sofia to stop dancing with Harpo, and Sofia complies, Harpo keeps holding Sofia tight while saying 'Listen Squeak […] Can't a man dance with his own wife?'[99] Harpo clearly prefers dancing with his separated wife to keeping his girlfriend satisfied. Furthermore, this exchange is also an example of Harpo taking power as a patriarch through disregarding Mary Agnes's feelings. This dynamic is made clearer after Mary Agnes slaps Sofia, and is beaten down by Sofia in return. Celie reports:

> Harpo and Sofia stand side by side looking down at Squeak, but I don't think they hear her. Harpo still holding Sofia arm. Maybe half a minute go by. Finally he turn loose her arm, reach down and cradle poor little Squeak in his arms. He coo and coo at her like she a baby.[100]

Firstly, this passage makes it clear that even when Mary Agnes is in pain, Harpo still tries to hold Sofia's hand, implicitly stating his preference for Sofia. Furthermore, when he eventually turns to Mary Agnes, he treats her like a child, performing the role of a patriarch again. Indeed, for Harpo, Mary Agnes seems to serve mostly as a manifestation of his *objet petit a*, to prove to the Other that he is a decent patriarch.

In the end, Harpo learns to be free of the Other's desire, and manages to love Sofia without having to control her. When Celie asks Harpo if it bothers him that Sofia starts working in Celie's store, Harpo says: 'What I'm gon mind for? […] It seem to make her happy. And I can take care of anything come up at home.'[101] Harpo is finally satisfied taking

[99] Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 83.
[100] Ibid., p. 83.
[101] Ibid., p. 281.

the role of home maker, and does not care that some might consider it unmanly. Additionally, he cares more about whether Sofia is happy than whether she behaves like other wives. Harpo goes on to tell Sofia: 'Well, you got me behind you, anyway […] And I love every judgement you ever made.' Thus, Harpo and Sofia's relationship ends in a state of mutual support and equality, with Harpo resisting the Other's desire and therefore not needing a submissive wife to bring him closer to the ideal as a powerful patriarch.

In general, *The Color Purple* suggests that relationships based on equality are more successful. The best example of this is the relationship between Shug and Celie, which is also the most consistent relationship amongst the main characters in the novel. Cristopher S. Lewis writes:

> Together, Celie and Shug demonstrate a model of sexual vulnerability and mutual dependence that has them working together consensually toward self-love rather than relating hierarchically—an interaction different from Albert's masculinist relationship with Celie.[102]

While Celie comes from the least privileged background of all the novel's characters, having no education, good looks, or money, she surprisingly seems to end up with the most successful relationship. However, considering that Lewis emphasises vulnerability and dependence, his analysis clarifies why Celie's relationship with Shug works. Celie is in a state of vulnerability and dependence throughout the novel, and it is only through her relationship with Shug that she achieves independence. Similarly, both Sofia and Harpo become more independent once Harpo accepts that he should not try to dominate Sofia. Consequently, the *objet petit a* becomes less present, as each partner enters a position where they do not have to

[102] Cristopher S. Lewis, 'Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 66, 2 (2012), 158-175, p. 163.

rely on any particular behaviour by their significant other in order to achieve their desired selfhood.

Furthermore, *The Color Purple* suggests that in a successful relationship, a partner puts the wellbeing of their significant other above the Other's desire. This is clear in Celie's case, as she does not appear influenced at all by the community's negative opinion of Shug. Harpo's submission to Albert's approach to patriarchy on the other hand impacts his marriage very negatively, just as Albert's compliance to his father's will drives Shug away from him. It is only when these characters resist the Other's desire that they regain their happiness, a situation which corresponds with Lacan's theories. In *The Color Purple*, it is women who initially resist the Other's desire. Ross writes:

> Demonstrating a parallel commitment to matrifocality, Sofia and Mary Agnes, former rivals, learn to share Harpo and the responsibility of raising each other's children as a means of maintaining freedom while avoiding the permanent dependence on one man that perpetuates masculine power.[103]

In this way, Sofia and Mary Agnes seem to demonstrate that the day of the dominating patriarch is over, as women are able to overcome their dependence on men if they cooperate. This feminine sharing of responsibilities over children, which contrasts strongly with the traditional family structure, and thus the Other's desire, arguably serves as an epiphany for Harpo, who realises that these women will eventually acquire independence, whether he controls them or not.

Although all the relationships in the novel have the *objet petit a* present, they differ when it comes to the Other's desire. While the *objet petit a* present in Celie's desire for Shug helps her find her voice and develop her independence, it is essentially a hindrance in the

[103] Ross, 'Celie in the Looking Glass', p. 82.

relationships between Shug and Germaine, as well as Sofia and Harpo. In Celie's case, the *objet petit a* develops her selfhood to the point where she can find satisfaction outside of the relationship, while in the other two, *the objet petit a*, based on the Other's desire, creates an imbalance between the partners. While Shug is happy while she is with Germaine, she implies that the relationship is mostly an opportunity for her to feel conventionally attractive again, and she knows that the relationship cannot last. Similarly, Harpo's and Sofia's relationship loses its harmony once one of the parts responds to the Other's desire while the opposite part resists it. Moreover, Harpo's second relationship is clearly impacted by this imbalance, as he prefers Sofia to Mary Agnes, implying that Mary Agnes is primarily used by him as an approach to a particular *objet petit a* creates by the Other's desire. In conclusion, *The Color Purple* suggests that while the strong presence of an *objet petit a* in a relationship is not inherently bad, an *objet petit a* stemming from the Other's desire is.

The Contrasting Narratives in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*

Alasdair Gray's novel *Poor Things* offers a more complex approach to subjectivity than *The Color Purple*. Due to the contrasting narratives of Archibald and Victoria McCandless, named Bella in Archibald's narrative, the novel offers two different perspectives of key events and characters, thus requiring a higher degree of interpretation. According to Victoria, Archibald's narrative is an attempt to construct 'a world where he and [Godwin] and [Victoria] existed in perfect equality'; hence it is also an attempt for Archibald to construct his own subjectivity.[104] Similarly, as Victoria's narrative is a repudiation of Archibald's narrative, she is also constructing her selfhood. Both narratives also serve as fictional artefacts encompassing the *objet petit a* for the characters. Furthermore, the documentation of these narratives acts as ways for the characters to hold their own against the Other's desire. Consequently, the novel lends itself very well to a discussion of Lacanian ideas of about subjectivity. In addition to Bella/Victoria and Archibald, this chapter will also examine Godwin Baxter. When critics approach *Poor Things*, they tend to focus on the character of Bella; any analysis of the male characters tends to focus on their interaction with her. Most of the analysis of Archibald and Godwin in this chapter will therefore be original.

Furthermore, critics tend to disagree with the degree of agency Bella has in the novel. Some, such as Eva Martines Ibáñes, argue that Bella's identity is continuously constructed by the male characters in the novel.[105] Other critics, such as Donald P. Kaczvinsky, argue that Bella is a liberated woman who resists male dominance.[106] This chapter agrees that Bella as described in Archibald's narrative appears as a male construction, but reads Victoria as

[104] Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things* (1992), (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), pp. 273-274.
[105] Eva Martines Ibáñes, 'Fantasising the Self: A Study of Alasdair Gray's "Lanark", "1982 Janine", "Something Leather" and "Poor Things"', (PhD thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1999).
[106] Donald P. Kaczvinsky, '"Making Up for Lost Time": Scotland, Stories, and the Self in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*', *Contemporary Literature*, 42, 4 (2001), 775-799.

presented in her own narrative as an independent character with agency. Like *The Color Purple*, all the romantic attractions in *Poor Things* have some level of *the objet petit a* in them, yet for most of the characters, their *objet petit a* stems from the Other's desire. Arguably, neither of the characters end up actually satisfying their desires, and this chapter will examine how the *objet petit a* relates to those failed desires. Furthermore, the plurality of characters experiencing the *objet petit a* in Bella in different ways suggests that subjects only needs to believe in the presence of the *objet petit a* in the beloved in order to experience it.

Due to the structure of the novel, with multiple narratives which sometimes contradict each other, discerning anything definite about the characters and events is difficult. As Ibáñes writes:

> In *Poor Things* it is impossible to feel secure in a knowledge of the characters, particularly Bella but also Godwin Baxter. We have three different points of view on the latter, Archibald McCandless', Bella's and "the editor's". Gray refuses to create a finished character while the multiple points of view through which the character of Bella is presented create a multiple self. There is no single point of view or focus from which to see her. Each character gives us a different version of events. Even Bella's own account of herself fails to provide a definite perspective because although it is the more credible possibility it only delivers yet another standpoint from which to interpret the story. That is why, despite all these different possibilities, the reader only gets a partial picture of Bella.[107]

Following Ibáñes, I would claim that the novel does not offer a clear picture of any of the characters, particularly Bella. Consequently, the characters seem to have different desires, hence different manifestations of their *objet petit a*, in their narratives. This chapter will

[107] Ibáñes, 'Fantasising the Self', pp. 194-195.

examine the *objet petit a* for each of the different narratives, but will not assume the correctness of either narrative over the other.

One of Archibald's desires present in the novel is to better himself and move towards the upper classes of society. Considering that the novel is set in the late Victorian era, with the rise of capitalism, desiring social mobility would not be uncommon, and would hence embed into this dissertation's reading of the Other's desire. Dave Cody writes:

> Members of the British aristocracy were gentlemen by right of birth (although it was also emphasized, paradoxically enough, that birth alone could not make a man a gentleman), while the new industrial and mercantile elites, in the face of opposition from the aristocracy, inevitably attempted to have themselves designated as gentlemen as a natural consequence of their growing wealth and influence. Other Victorians — clergy belonging to the Church of England, army officers, members of Parliament — were recognized as gentlemen by virtue of their occupations […] Eventually, the Victorians settled on a compromise: by the latter part of the century, it was almost universally accepted that the recipient of a traditional liberal education based largely on Latin at one of the elite public schools — Eton, Harrow, Rugby, and so on — would be recognized as a gentleman, no matter what his origins had been. [108]

In other words, Archibald's contemporary society strongly values men who have the right education, causing education to be strongly linked to the Other's desire. Archibald also desires the manners and demeanour that comes with an upper-class upbringing. Victoria claims that he envies Godwin for having a famous, knighted father, just like he resents her

[108] David Cody, 'The Gentleman', <http://www.victorianweb.org/history/gentleman.html> [accessed 12.04.2018]

own 'wealthy father, convent education and famous first husband', as well as her 'superior social graces.'[109] Archibald's desire is thus shown to be strongly linked to social aspirations.

Archibald is also influenced by his immediate surroundings to desire equality with the upper classes. As Archibald is the illegitimate son resulting from an affair between a mostly anonymous father, nicknamed Scraffles, and one of his servants, Archibald is fully aware of his poor social standing. On the death bed of Archibald's mother, she gives him all her savings, and tells him to make something of himself with it. Archibald responds that he will become a doctor, which causes her mouth to twist 'into the grimace she made at all queer suggestions.'[110] His dying mother thus wishes for him to join the middle class, while she also suggests that he does not have the skills to become a doctor. Following this exchange, Archibald's ideal self in the Imaginary is of someone equal to the middle- and upper class. He writes: 'At university my clothes and manners announced my farm-servant origins, and as I would let nobody sneer at me on that account I was usually alone outside the lecture theatres and examination hall.'[111] Thus, Archibald reveals how his Imaginary is so vulnerable that he would rather be ostracised than have anyone challenge this image of being an equal. Furthermore, due to his pride, he rejects a condescending offer of a grant by one of his professors, telling him that he is 'from a part of Galloway where folk disliked begging for charity'.[112] Archibald thus shows how his desire for equality comes from the Other's desire, stemming from his mother, his upbringing in Galloway, and from Victorian culture at large. As a result, anything and anyone that can allow him class mobility will encompass the *objet petit a* for him.

[109] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 273.
[110] Ibid., p. 9.
[111] Ibid., p. 9.
[112] Ibid., p. 10.

When Archibald subsequently meets Godwin, he is primed to recognise this *objet petit a* in him. Archibald writes: '[i]t was said that Godwin's father got him late in life by a domestic servant, but (unlike my own father) gave his son his own surname, a private education and a small fortune.'[113] As they are both born out of wedlock to aristocratic fathers and working-class mothers, Archibald undoubtedly recognises the likeness between them. Consequently, Godwin seems more of an equal to Archibald, and the likeness builds a basis for identification in the Imaginary. However, as Archibald points out, Godwin's father gave him a much better start in life than Scraffles gave Archibald, causing Godwin to be privileged in ways that Archibald is not. Possessing an estate, and being an esteemed surgeon, Godwin has certainly made something of himself, as Archibald's mother would put it, and Archibald recognises that he can come closer to this *objet petit a* through associating with Godwin.

Nevertheless, Archibald depicts Godwin as a highly unattractive, even repulsive, person. He introduces Godwin by writing '[d]espite the ogreish body he had the wide hopeful eyes, snub nose and mournful mouth of an anxious infant, with a brow corrugated by three deep permanent wrinkles.'[114] This description is of someone monstrous in appearance, combining infantile traits with those of an old man. Contrastingly, Victoria tends to nickname Godwin God, alluding to his surgical creation of her in Archibald's narrative, and, in her own narrative, his creation of her in an abstract sense through granting her a liberal education. Furthermore, Victoria directly disputes her husband's account of Godwin:

> Why did my second husband describe Godwin as a monster whose appearance made babies scream, nursemaids flee and horses shy? God was a big sad-looking man, but so careful and alert and *unforcing* in all his movements that animals, small people, hurt and

[113] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 15.
[114] Ibid., p. 13.

> lonely people, all women (I repeat and emphasize it) ALL WOMEN AT FIRST SIGHT felt safe and at peace with him.[115]

Victoria's account of Godwin draws him in a completely different light, describing his appearance as someone whom it is very comfortable to be around. Furthermore, her nicknaming him God suggests that she does not perceive him as an other, someone she identifies with, but rather puts him in the place of the 'huge and miraculous Other' that Mansfield mentions.[116]

Archibald arguably describes Godwin as monstrous to compensate for the lack he sees in himself; just like Archibald is in want of a middle-class background, Godwin, in Archibald's narrative, is in want of an attractive physical appearance. Consequently, Archibald depicts them both as outcasts at the university, as he describes Godwin as keeping 'as far from others as possible, being desperately shy.'[117] Thus, Archibald constructs a narrative where Godwin embodies Archibald's *objet petit a*, yet can still be considered to be equal to Archibald. Consequently, Archibald's narrative lets him identify with Godwin and therefore his *objet petit a*. Another way of interpreting Archibald's construction of Godwin as monstrous is through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of male homosocial desire. Sedgwick's term denotes social bonds between men existing on a continuum with homosexuality, yet disrupted from homosexual desire by 'the often intense homophobia […] that marks rituals of male bonding'.[118] While Lacan's paradigm offers less insight on interpersonal bonds and queer theory than Sedgwick, he allows for deeper intrapersonal understanding.

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[115] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 259, emphasis in original.
[116] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, p. 46
[117] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 13.
[118] Vincent B. Leitch and others, 'Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch and others (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 2464-2466, p. 2465.

The relationship between Victoria and Archibald can also be read as Archibald attempting to achieve the *objet petit a* he recognises in Godwin. In Archibald's narrative, he supplies a long account of Godwin revealing how he has imagined his ideal mate, likening her to a picture he has seen of Ophelia. Godwin says:

> I dreamed of a fascinating stranger—a woman I had not yet met so could only imagine—a friend who would need and admire me as much as I needed and admired her. No doubt a mother supplies this want in most young creatures […] The woman I imagined stimulated me like that. I found her picture in Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* […] Ophelia was listening to her brother, […] her eager face looked toward something wonderful outside the picture, and I wanted it to be me. Her expression excited me more than her lovely body in a flowing violet gown, because I thought I knew all about bodies. Her expression excited me more than her lovely face, for I had seen women with such faces in the park – when they walked toward me their faces froze, grew pale or bright pink and tried not to see me at all. Ophelia could look at me with loving wonder because she saw the inner man I would become—the kindest, greatest doctor in the world who would save her life and the life of millions.[119]

This passage makes it clear that Godwin's desire is not for physical gratification, but for the image of himself that he imagines that Ophelia sees in him. He has tried to envision a physical manifestation of the *objet petit a*; in his case this takes the form of a woman who can see behind his unattractive exterior and calls forth the image of the beloved doctor he wishes to become. Godwin's romantic desire is based mostly on the Imaginary, something Fink warns against. Fink writes that love 'as a projection of perfection onto the beloved as a reflection of

[119] Gray, *Poor Things*, pp. 38-39.

oneself (as one could like to see oneself)' is essentially 'narcissism', and warns against 'the tension and hatred generated when we can no longer ignore some feature of the other that clearly does not fit into our own view of ourselves'.[120] Considering that the lover Godwin imagines is constituted by a picture of a fictitious woman, Godwin's desire is clearly quite shallow, as the woman imagined has no actual traits of her own. Thus, Godwin evokes the Classical myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor who fell in love with his most beautiful sculpture. Essentially, the partner Godwin desires is pure *objet petit a*, in that he desires her for the image she brings to himself.

Victoria, under the alias of Bella, eventually takes the place of this imagined woman for Godwin. Godwin tells Archibald: 'I have nothing to complain about now. Bella's smile is happier than Ophelia's was, and makes me happy too'.[121] Bella is clearly the new object of Godwin's desire. As such, Bella choosing to be with Archibald instead of Godwin implies that Archibald is superior to Godwin. Bella's choice further implies that Archibald essentially could acquire the *objet petit a* he sees in Godwin, as he has already proved himself to be more attractive to Bella, and thus more resourceful. Archibald's victory is made clear when Bella reveals to Godwin that she is engaged to Archibald. Godwin's reaction is depicted thus:

> Then came the most terrifying experience of my life. The only part of Baxter which moved was his mouth. It slowly and silently opened into a round hole bigger than the original size of his head then grew larger still until his head vanished behind it. His body seemed to support a black, expanding, tooth-fringed cavity in the scarlet sunset behind him. When the scream came the whole sky seemed screaming.[122]

[120] Fink, *Lacan on Love*, pp. 88, 102.
[121] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 41.
[122] Ibid., p. 52.

The loss of Bella causes such an extreme physical reaction in Godwin that it seems otherworldly. Thus, Archibald's narrative makes it clear that he has bested Godwin through engaging Bella. Furthermore, in Archibald's narrative, his and Bella's engagement speeds up Godwin's death. On his deathbed, Godwin tells Archibald:

> Sir Colin told me from my earliest youth that my life depended on keeping a continuously even temper—strong feelings would lethally emphasize incompatibilities in my internal organs. When Bella told me she had engaged to marry you the agony damaged my respiration.[123]

Archibald has thus quite clearly defeated Godwin, not only marrying the woman whom Godwin loves, but also speeding up his ultimate demise. Accordingly, Archibald's manuscript is a narrative of him conquering the *objet petit a*, represented by his alleged friend, through proving himself superior to that which he cannot acquire, which is an upper class background.

Victoria's account offers two significant discrepancies from Archibald's narrative. The first is that she did not reject Godwin, claiming that he is the 'only man' whom she 'truly loved'.[124] Instead, it was Godwin who rejected her. Victoria complains that 'God would not let me seduce him', adding that he tells her: 'Please do not fall in love with me, […] I want no master—and no mistress.'[125] For Victoria, Godwin thus also becomes the ultimate *objet petit a*, as in refusing to have a love life, he refuses to become equal to Victoria. Fink writes about a similar situation by interpreting Lacan's reading of Plato's *Symposium*, in a scene where Alcibiades is upset at the imbalance of love between him and Socrates. Alcibiades knows he is loved by Socrates, but he also wants some sign, i.e. an erection, proving that Socrates physically desires him. Fink speculates about Alcibiades reasons for wanting this, writing:

[123] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 242.
[124] Ibid., p. 259.
[125] Ibid., p. 265.

> One possible answer is that he feels a need to reduce Socrates from the Other with a capital *O* to the small other, from the idealized Other whom he looks up to and who judges, criticizes, and upbraids him, to an object (another person like himself) to get off on, a substitutable object that is no better than any other. He perhaps believes that if he can get Socrates to have sex with him, he will cut him down to size, reduce him to the status of an ordinary lascivious mortal, and have him at his mercy. […] The [Other] is a forbidding godlike figure. One cannot have a relationship with such a person […], unless one is convinced this Other is always satisfied with one's performance in life. Which is rare indeed. To be borne, this Other has to be cut down to sixe. […] [Socrates] refuses to be reduced to an other like any other for Alcibiades. […] Is it because he insists upon remaining the cause of Alcibiades' desire, object *a*, rather than one in a series of object of Alcibiades' desire? Because he absolutely must be the singular object that will put an end to the metonymic slippage of Alcibiades' desire?[126]

The situation between Victoria and Godwin is quite similar to the one Fink describes between Alcibiades and Socrates. Godwin quite clearly cares a lot for Victoria, as shown by him taking her in, educating her, and leaving her everything he owns. He arguably even loves her. However, this is not enough for Victoria, who confesses that she 'could not face [the] truth' of Godwin not desiring her, to the point where she is unable to sleep, writing: 'I loved him with all my heart and all my mind and all my soul so wanted to convert him to humanity.'[127] Her wanting to convert him to humanity implies that she wants to see him less as the idealised Other that Fink also talks about, and more as another person like herself, someone she can later substitute for someone else. As Godwin resists this humanisation, he stays in the position of the idealised Other. Victoria proves again how her desire for him blocks her from fully

[126] Fink, *Lacan on Love*, pp. 193-194, emphasis in original
[127] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 265.

desiring other men, saying 'although the sensual appetite was strong in me I could not or would not split it off from the moral appetite to embrace the admirable, and who could I admire more than God[win]?'[128] Godwin's rejection of becoming an equal other to Victoria thus keeps her from fully loving other men, and he stays the only man she has ever loved. The cause of her desire becomes fixed on being with Godwin, or someone she can look up to as much as him, causing the Lacanian metonymic slippage of desire to halt.

Furthermore, Godwin turns into the idealised image of the person Victoria herself wants to become. After Godwin rejects Victoria's advances and tells her that he is dying, Victoria says that she will be his doctor and cure him. When he subsequently tells her that he is incurable, she responds: 'I will become a doctor on the world's account! […] I will save some people's lives, if not yours. I will replace you! I will become you!'[129] Godwin is thus not only the idealised Other for Victoria, but he becomes the model for her ideal self. However, this is also a way for Victoria to reduce Godwin from the Other to a more equal other. By becoming a doctor, like Godwin, and becoming someone she could herself admire, she bridges the gap between them, dispersing the *objet petit a* she experiences in Godwin into other achievements, such as getting educated in medicine and curing the sick. But this said, given that she claims that Godwin is the only man she has ever loved, even two decades after his death, she arguably did not succeed in bringing her Imaginary closer to her image of Godwin. Hence, Godwin stays an obsession for her as the idealised Other.

The other significant discrepancy between Victoria's and Archibald's narrative is that Victoria claims Archibald was first and foremost in love with Godwin. Victoria writes:

> McCandless had first met God in the university anatomy department where God gave demonstrations when the usual lecturer was off sick. Small, awkward

[128] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 267.
[129] Ibid., p. 266.

> McCandless fell as passionately in love with God as I had done. He loved me too, of course, but only because he saw me as God's female part—the part he could embrace and enter. But God was the first great love of his life, and the love was not returned. Long before I came to Park Circus McCandless had spied out the routes by which God took his dogs for their Sunday walk, and kept joining him on these.[130]

Victoria's account implies that Archibald did not just desire Godwin's background as an educated and cared-for member of the gentry, but that he also desired a romantic relationship with Godwin. There are a few hints to this in Archibald's own narrative. Archibald reveals that he has a strong affection for Godwin's company, saying that the months after their fight were the loneliest months he had known, and revealing that he 'strolled round Park Circus at least once a fortnight', hoping to bump into Godwin, as he 'lacked the courage' to show up at Godwin's own home.[131] The behaviour Archibald exhibits here is strikingly like that of a scorned suitor, hoping to find his beloved in the park, but too afraid to approach his doorstep, as he knows he is not wanted. If Archibald is truly in love with Godwin, then this changes the way in which Godwin represents the *objet petit a* for Archibald.

Victoria never gives any clues as to why Archibald falls in love with Godwin, but it has likely something to do with Godwin's intellect and tenderness, as they are his most celebrated characteristics in the novel. As there is no account of Archibald falling in love with any of the other students at the Glasgow medical faculty, his love seems not purely due to class or wealth, because there must have been other students from families of similar wealth and class as Godwin. Archibald is arguably attracted to Godwin because he desires recognition from the upper classes rather than immersion into them. Victoria writes that by having fulfilled 'his mother's ambition by joining the middle class', Archibald 'would have

[130] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 267-268.
[131] Ibid., p. 26.

been a decent general practitioner had he not used Baxter's money to buy the idleness he mistook for freedom.'[132] Archibald clearly has no ambition to do the kind of altruistic work that Victoria and Godwin do. Instead, Victoria implies that his only ambition was to become someone of whom his mother would be proud. Archibald seems like someone who desires recognition and appreciation from those around him, rather than someone who stands out from the crowd for their abilities.

Archibald's desire for appreciation can also be found in his approach to his marriage. Towards the end of his narrative, Victoria praises him, saying 'how good to have a man I need not thank at all, who I cuddle and who cuddles me every night, is pleasant company in the mornings and evenings, and leaves me alone every day to get on with my work.'[133] Although he might not exert any masculine dominance, Archibald's passivity in his relationship with Victoria is celebrated as a strength in this narrative. Similarly, while his role in helping the housekeeper with the nurturing of the children is unorthodox for the time-period, it allows Victoria to fulfil her own dream of becoming a doctor. Consequently, Archibald could be said to play the role of a good housewife, and in his own narrative, he implies that Victoria appreciates this quality in him. Additionally, Archibald's narrative can be read as an exercise in resisting the Other's desire, interpreted to include social conventions, because Archibald is appreciated for qualities which are conventionally looked down upon in members of the male sex.

Furthermore, Archibald's dual attraction to Victoria as an equivalent of Godwin is arguably due to both of them being very nurturing, causing him to see them as someone able to appreciate him for who he is. Ibáñes suggests that Archibald's account of Victoria as Bella is highly influenced by him seeing her as a mother. She writes:

[132] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 254.
[133] Ibid., p. 232.

> in *Poor Things* we can see the need McCandless has of the image of Bella he has created. McCandless dedicates his book "to she who makes my life worth living. " The high dependency of McCandless on Bella is reflected in the image of Bella as "mother" recurrent throughout the novel. She is the mother of her brain; the demands of McCandless on her are the demands of affection of a child towards its mother. McCandless usually links the image of Bella to that of the Virgin Mary, the epitome of motherhood. He idealises her as a representation of the Virgin Mary. When he meets Bella for the first time, he notices an illustration of a Madonna and Child lying open in the room.[134]

By constructing Bella in his novel as the image of a mother, Archibald uses her as an *objet petit a* to create a narrative where he is highly appreciated for who he is. As a mother figure, she can offer him the image of a desired husband.

Victoria, on the other hand, makes it clear that she does not appreciate the passivity of Archibald. Victoria and Godwin decide that she needs a husband to help establish her as a doctor, yet Victoria also admits that 'such a man would have to be (in the eyes of the world and perhaps my own) a weakling', and that she 'married Archibald McCandless because he was convenient'.[135] For Victoria, Archibald is not so much *objet petit a* as simply an object. Even though she only married him for 'convenience', and because he enables her dream of becoming a doctor by acting like a perfect housewife, Victoria seems to resent Archibald because he does not live up to the standard set by Godwin. Although Archibald thus enables her to reach her idealised image of herself, he does not represent the *objet petit a* for her. Through Victoria's resentment towards him, as shown in statements like '[h]e was not much

[134] Ibáñes, 'Fantasising the Self', p. 208.
[135] Gray, *Poor Things,* pp. 251, 268.

use to anyone else', she reveals that she does not experience the *objet petit a* in him.[136] As the *objet petit a* is the cause for desire, Victoria's resentment towards Archibald makes sense, as he does in no way cause her to desire to become a doctor. Instead, Victoria strongly implies that Archibald is more of a tool for her to help her career and satisfy her physical needs, suggesting that she could have easily substituted him for someone else with similar traits.

Some critics argue that Victoria's character is continuously used as a construct to be filled by men's desire. As such, Victoria very much becomes a surface onto which the male characters to project their *objet petit a*. Ibáñes writes

> Bella plays a definite and fixed role for each of these male characters. According to McCandless's account, Godwin Baxter's principal aim when he "makes" Bella is to put into practice his father's scientific discoveries for his own benefit. Baxter, like Dr. Frankenstein, selfishly "gives birth" to this woman in order to make her his daughter-cum-platonic lover. […] For Duncan Wedderburn, the lecherous lover with whom she elopes to Europe, she is an innocent and charming housemaid who unexpectedly becomes a dangerous nymphomaniac witch. […] To Harry Astley and Dr Hooker, the two travelers whom Bella befriends on her cruise in the Mediterranean, she represents the innocent abroad. She is charmingly naïve and has to be protected from the evils of the world.[137]

Thus, Ibáñes suggests that Bella acts as a surface for the *objet petit a*, taking on different fantasies and desires for different characters. The fact that she simultaneously represents motherhood, innocence, nymphomania and an ideal lover to different characters suggests that the *objet petit a* does not need to be grounded in reality to be perceived. Instead, the plurality of interpretations of Bella offers a reading where the *objet petit a* is in the eye of the beholder,

[136] Gray, *Poor Things*, p. 251.
[137] Ibáñes, 'Fantasising the Self', pp. 203-204.

and where all that is needed to experience the *objet petit a* is a willingness to believe that it is present in the beloved. However, critics are in disagreement about whether any of the male characters in *Poor Things* are actually able to define Bella/Victoria in the way they want. Ibáñes writes:

> Bella is created by the male characters. The reader is never permitted a glimpse of her through the eyes of a female character. Therefore, she is constructed through gender and her femininity is always foregrounded. She is a lover, a mother, a nymphomaniac, a daughter... When she tries to break moulds by becoming a doctor she is treated as a mad and evil woman who performs abortions on the poor.[138]

Furthermore, even though Bella attempts to create an identity for herself by becoming a doctor, the fictional 'Notes Critical and Historical' at the end of the novel reveals that she never managed to be taken serious by her society at large.

However, Donald P. Kaczvinsky, Kirsten Stirling, John Glendening, Frederick D. King, and Alison Lee, all argue otherwise. Kaczvinsky writes that 'Bella is what the Victorians most feared in a wife: the sexually liberated woman who feels no shame or guilt about her erotic self. She refuses to be tamed.'[139] Stirling writes:

> Bella's body exists for the men in the novel as a space to be filled with preconceptions of virtue or vice, and the infancy of her brain within her adult body makes it a space to be filled with the thoughts of others. But she does fulfil the threat of becoming a thinking and reasoning animal: the first woman doctor to graduate from Glasgow University, no less[140]

[138] Ibáñes, 'Fantasising the Self', p. 209.
[139] Kaczvinsky, '"Making Up for Lost Time"', p. 786.
[140] Kirsten Stirling, 'The Image of the Nation as a Woman in Twentieth Century Scottish Literature: Hugh MacDiarmid, Naomi Mitchison, Alasdair Gray' (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2001), p. 155.

Similarly, King and Lee write that 'while male characters try to fit Bella into subservient roles, they have little success', and Glendening adds that Bella 'is nobody's victim; instead, she becomes a New Woman who is resourceful, unencumbered by social convention, and sexually active.'[141] These critics all suggest that while the male characters in *Poor Things* desire for Bella to act a certain way, Bella refuses to cave in to their demands, and manages to build her own identity. *Poor Things* seems to suggest that the *objet petit a* desired from romantic partners can in some ways be performed, just like Bella initially performs different female archetypes for different characters. However, as most of Bella's relationships are very temporary, the novel does not really address whether this performance can be sustained. Instead, the marriage between Victoria and Archibald, which is the only lasting romantic relationship in the novel, is characterised by Archibald's envy of Victoria and Godwin, and Victoria's dissatisfaction with Archibald. Hence, the novel suggests that while the *objet petit a* may be performed in some instances, this performed *objet petit a* will eventually falter, and the romantic other's authentic character will be revealed.

In conclusion, the characters' relation to the *objet petit a* vary a lot from one narrative to the other. In Archibald's own narrative, he fulfils the desire to move to the middle class, which stems from his dying mother's wish and partially from the Other's desire. He subsequently experiences the *objet petit a* in whatever offers him social mobility. Godwin initially becomes an ideal version of himself, as Archibald recognises their similarity as illegitimate children of the land-owning gentry, while Godwin otherwise incorporates the wealth, appreciation and esteem that Archibald desires. Archibald ends up proving himself superior to Godwin by seizing his beloved and indirectly speeding up Godwin's death. Hence,

[141] John Glendening, Education, 'Science, and Secular Ethics in Alasdair Grays *Poor Things'*, *Mosaics: an interdisciplinary critical journal*, 49, 2 (2016), 75-93, p. 79.
Frederick D. King and Alison Lee, 'Bibliographic Metafiction: Dancing in the Margins with Alasdair Gray', *University of Wisconsin Press*, 57, 2 (2016), 216-244, pp. 218-219.

his marriage to Bella is an *objet petit a* used as a confirmation to Archibald that he is superior to Godwin and the class he represents.

In Victoria's account Archibald is not competing with Godwin over the same beloved; instead, Godwin is the beloved of Archibald. Consequently, Archibald's relationship is not about proving himself equal to the upper classes, but rather to be loved by members of that class. If this is the case, Archibald's *objet petit a* is related to being recognised and appreciated, instead of acquiring greatness. His attraction to Godwin and Victoria is due to their compassionate personalities. However, neither of them truly loved him in return, and the implicit envy for them in his narrative reveals that he is eventually disillusioned about the reality of his marriage.

The account of Godwin also completely varies in the different narratives. In Archibald's narrative, Godwin dreams up his ideal woman, and her main characteristic is that she reflects him as his ideal self, which is as a doctor so great that his outer appearance does not matter. Godwin's ideal woman is in this version almost a pure representation of the *objet petit a*, as she is shaped purely around the cause of Godwin's desire. In Victoria's narrative, however, Godwin does not desire any romantic relationships. Instead, Victoria is the one desiring him, and he eventually comes to represent her idealised Other, as his refusal to succumb to Victoria's seduction makes her see him as having no human flaws. Consequently, he stays the object of her desire, and cannot be substituted by anything or anyone else. Victoria herself tries to shape herself in his image by becoming a doctor and helping the poor and unprivileged. However, as she reveals that Godwin is the only man she has ever loved, she strongly suggests that she stays unable to see herself as Godwin's equal, and that he remains her ultimate *objet petit a*.

In Archibald's account, Bella is treated by men like an interchangeable *objet petit a*, taking the form of whichever female archetype they wish to see in her. However, she

ultimately resists these approaches, and becomes a doctor by her own choosing. Furthermore, in this narrative she appreciates Archibald because he does not try to control her. If so, he does not represent the *objet petit a* for her in any particular way, but she appreciates that she does not need to act in any specific way to sustain the *objet petit a* for him.

In general, the characters in *Poor Things* seem to enter relationships with some preconceived notion of their partners, and end up disappointed by them. Archibald expects Victoria to respect him for the passive person he is, while Victoria expects Archibald to desire the same thing as her, which is to be like Godwin. Neither of them satisfied the other's demand. Godwin, as presented in Archibald's narrative, expects his ideal woman to see him as someone highly admirable, and when Bella fails to meet this expectation and decides to marry someone else, the disappointment causes Godwin's life to shorten. This pattern is also repeated in the character of Wedderburns, who runs away with Bella thinking she is an innocent woman wanting to marry him and ends up losing his sanity, because she does not behave the way he expects her to. *Poor Things* can be read as a warning against illusions of the romantic partner. The novel thus depicts individuals preoccupied with the Lacanian order of the Imaginary, as they expect their partners to adhere either to the image of themselves, or that of other subjects with which the individuals identify.

Oscar's Desire for Hyper-Masculinity

Junot Díaz's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* depicts the titular protagonist, Oscar de León, growing up in a hyper-masculine Dominican subculture in New Jersey. At the heart of the novel is the unattractiveness of the overweight and nerdy Oscar, as well as his failure to conform to the masculine ideal approved by his peers. As this hyper-masculinity is closely linked to objectifying women, and to having sexual and romantic relationships with women, the novel portrays a culture where male success is closely linked to heterosexual activity and romantic partners.[142] In this culture, the *objet petit a* is in other words intimately tied to members of the opposite sex. Furthermore, this *objet petit a* stems from the discourse expressed by the Dominican population at large, whose expressions will be interpreted as Lacan's notion of the Other's desire. Furthermore, as Oscar is a self-proclaimed nerd, he is strongly influenced by the master-narratives presented in his favourite genres, which are science fiction, fantasy and superhero fiction. Subsequently, Oscar's ideal self is closely tied to the depiction of success offered in these works. Hence, for Oscar, the *objet petit a* is also a product of the Other's desire presented by the media he consumes. As Díaz is a professor of creative writing at Massachusetts Institution of Technology he is likely familiar with the theories of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, and is likely to have been aware of certain paradigms relating to the ones discussed here whilst writing the novel.

This chapter will examine how the *objet petit a* in Oscar's romantic attractions is influenced by the Dominican subculture he inhabits as well as the master-narratives presented by his reading. Furthermore, this chapter agrees with critics, such as Fremio Sepulveda, who argue for the radical otherness of Oscar in the Dominican culture, partially because of his large body and partially because his careful demeanour differs from the abrasiveness

[142] Recent allegations of sexual misconduct towards Díaz suggests he is also influenced by a culture of hyper-masculinity.

expressed by his Dominican peers.[143] Accordingly, this chapter argues that Oscar's romantic attractions are influenced by his desire to be seen as a valid member of Dominican masculinity. Hence, these attractions strongly encompass the *objet petit a* for Oscar, as they hold the promise of validating his masculinity in the eyes of his peers. Hpwever, while some critics, such as Hannah Fraser LeGris, argue for the queerness of the character of Yunior, this chapter will not focus on any notions of said queerness due to the chapter's limited length.[144]

To understand how, in the novel, the Dominican culture's obsession with heterosexual relations is established, one should start by looking at the former dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Although Trujillo only appears briefly in the novel, interacting with Abelard, Oscar's grandfather, he is referenced throughout the text due to the alleged fukú or curse he has placed upon Oscar's family, and due to his importance in Dominican history. During the narrative surrounding Abelard, Yunior repeatedly stresses how Trujillo used his influence to have sex with and essentially rape women. Yunior writes: 'So common was the practice, so insatiable Trujillo's appetites, that there were plenty of men in the nation, hombres de calidad y posición [men of quality and position], who, believe it or not, offered up their daughters *freely* to the Failed Cattle Thief.'[145] As Trujillo at this point in time is the most powerful person in the Dominican Republic, the novel thus establishes masculine power in the context of being able to have sex with lots of women. Subsequently, the Other's desire equates to men having heterosexual intercourse, as this behaviour conforms to the one exerted by the hegemonic elite.

[143] Fremio Sepulveda, 'Coding the Immigrant Experience: Race, Gender and the Figure of the Dictator in Junot Diaz's *Oscar Wao'*, *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 7, 2 (2013), 15-33.
[144] Hannah Fraser LeGris, 'Hybridity, Trauma and Queer Identity: Reading Masculinity Across the Texts of Junot Díaz' (Master thesis, University of Kentucky, 2014).
[145] Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2008) p. 217, emphasis in original, all translations mine.

Some critics also suggest that Trujillo's sexual conquests are what made him esteemed in the eyes of his compatriots. Sepulveda writes that 'for Trujillo women became useful for garnering social and political status'.[146] Similarly, Laura Derby writes: 'Trujillo embodied the tigre […], the quintessential Dominican underdog, who gains power, prestige, and social ascendance, extra-institutional wits, force of will, sartorial style, and cojones (balls). The tigre seduces through impeccable attire, implacable charm, irresistible sexuality and a touch of violence.'[147] Thus, both Sepulveda and Derby imply that prior to Trujillo rising to power, the Dominican culture idealised sexually aggressive behaviour in men, and that Trujillo used this idealisation to manufacture power. In the novel, Yunior basically equates being Dominican with desiring to have a lot of sex, saying that 'Trujillo might have been a Dictator, but he was a Dominican Dictator, which is another way of saying he was the Number-One Bellaco [horny male] in the Country.'[148] Consequently, as the Other encourages Dominican men to seek a large number of (hetero)sexual encounters, these encounters embody the *objet petit a*, as they enable the men to see themselves as models of the idealised hyper-masculinity. Furthermore, these critics suggest that the *objet petit a* can be used for political advantage, because some of Trujillo's popularity comes from his ability to use women to create a particular public image of himself. As the Trujillo presented in the novel is clearly unsuitable to run a country without abusing his power, the novel implies that acquiring conventional *objet petit a* and thus embodying an ideal image can be used to obtain power and blindside one's countrymen.

For Oscar, the encouragement for romantic passion also comes from more intimate sources. Yunior writes:

[146] Sepulveda, 'Coding the Immigrant Experience', p. 27.
[147] Lauren Derby, 'The Dictator's Seduction: Gender and State Spectacle during the Trujillo Regime', *Callaloo*, 23, 3 (2000), 1112-1146, p. 1116.
[148] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, pp. 216-217.

> Every Dominican family has stories about crazy loves, about niggers who take love too far, and Oscar's family was no different. His abuelo [grandfather], the dead one, had been unyielding about one thing or another (no one ever exactly said) and ended up in prison, first mad, then dead; his abuela [grandmother] Nena Inca had lost her husband six months after they got married. He had drowned on Semana Santa and she never remarried, never touched another man. We'll be together soon enough, Oscar had heard her say.[149]

Thus Yunior suggests that all Dominican families have stories about the intensity of love, and love taken too far. These stories then form a canon of love, essentially legitimising extreme and irrational behaviour when it comes to love and passion, and give Oscar reason to believe that strong love encourages abnormal behaviour, and also that irrational behaviour implies a powerful romantic affection.

Yunior's narrative of Belicia's youth establishes that, like Trujillo, women also believe romantic relationships enable social mobility. Belicia's first love is 'Jack Pujols of course: the school's handsomest (read: whitest) boy', who comes from a wealthy family and is 'the school's Apollo, its Mithra. The teachers, the staff, the girls, the boys, all threw petals of adoration beneath his finely arched feet'.[150] Jack exudes privilege, both white privilege and class privilege, and Belicia dreams of becoming part of the wealthy lifestyle he represents, believing she can achieve her dreams through relationships with men like him. Yunior writes that 'Beli at thirteen only had eyes for the Jack Pujolses of the world', and that in her favourite daydream, 'a dashing European […] (who happened to look exactly like Jack Pujols) would catch sight of her in the bakery and fall madly in love with her and sweep her off to his château in France.'[151] Her attraction to Jack Pujols and her daydreams are closely

[149] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 45.
[150] Ibid., pp. 89-90.
[151] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

tied to the *objet petit a*, as she believes a relationship with these people will let her enter the upper class, which is where she sees her ideal self.

When Belicia is with Dionisio, otherwise known as the Gangster, she briefly acts like her ideal self. Yunior describes Belicia's and Dionisio's vacation in Samaná in this way:

> It was the first time ever that Beli had her own space totally under her control, so while the Gangster dozed restfully in his hamaca [hammock] she busied herself with playing wife, with creating a preliminary draft of the household they would soon inhabit […] (In her mind she became his wife that week in every sense but the legal.)[152]

Here, Belicia acts like a diligent and capable housewife. While she has previously helped La Inca in her bakery, there is no previous mention in the novel that she has paid any particular emphasis to housework. Hence, being with the Gangster transforms her behaviour, seemingly giving her a new interest in housekeeping. Belicia apparently believes that she only now can or should enact this particular behaviour, proving that this image of herself is closely tied to her being in a relationship with a wealthy man. Aquiring her *objet petit a* of being in a privileged relationship is so influential to Belicia that she changes behaviour accordingly. Belicia's behaviour suggests that there is a metonymic slippage of desire for her between having a husband and acting like she is responsible for her home. For Belicia, having a husband is necessary in order for there to be Symbolic value in taking control of a household.

Furthermore, while there are other ways for Belicia to rise through the social ranks, it is only through relationships that she finds the *objet petit a*. While her guardian is not particularly wealthy, she still insists on paying for the best schools for Belicia. However, after being expelled from El Redentor, one of the best schools in Baní, Belicia refuses ever to go

[152] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 133.

back to school.[153] She fails to realise that a good education would help her become renowned and wealthy, essentially enabling some of the same lifestyle that she believes she can get from Jack Pujols and the Gangster. Belicia's *objet petit a* of a lavish lifestyle is metonymically tied to having an eligible husband in the position of the other one associates with, rather than to her own accomplishments. The novel suggests that girls like Belicia are being encouraged to think that a good partner equals success. Yunior writes that Belicia 'wasn't the only girl dreaming like this', that her ideas were 'the dreamshit that they fed girls day and night', and that 'Belicia was, if it was possible, even more susceptible to the Casanova Wave than many of her peers.'[154] While Yunior does not in this instance specify who "they" are, he seems to imply mainstream Dominican media, listing the society pages of the Dominican newspaper *Listín Diario*. Belicia's ideas about how she can be transformed by a relationship to a man are not entirely her own, but something she has been taught. The novel suggests that the narratives presented by the Dominican media that Belicia consumes express the Other's desire and influences her *objet petit a* to focus on eligible heterosexual partners rather than self-improvement.

Belicia eventually becomes disillusioned with the dream that her life will solve itself through marriage to a wealthy man. When she flees to the United States, Yunior notes that her 'dreams are spare, lack the propulsion of a mission, her ambition is without traction.'[155] Subsequently, her life is characterised by her continuously working several jobs and rarely being at home with her family. For the rest of her life, she never gets close to living the upper-class life she desires nor to her ideal self. Accordingly, none of her romantic relationships can be said to give her the *objet petit a* she desires. Instead, both Jack Pujols and the Gangster lie to her and take advantage of her naivety, each respectively causing her to get expelled from

[153] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life,* p. 103.
[154] Ibid., pp. 87-88.
[155] Ibid., p. 164.

school and almost killed. As her naivety stems from her romantic fantasies, her *objet petit a* arguably causes her downfall, as she is unable to see the true motivations of Jack and the Gangster.

For Oscar, the brief period of being popular with girls in his childhood is brought to an end through the Other's desire. When Maritza, one of his two girlfriends, decides that Oscar must choose between her and Olga, his other girlfriend, Oscar is forced to recognise that one of them is more valued by his peers than the other. Olga smells 'on some days of ass', causing the children at school to call her 'Mrs. Peabody', and Oscar's mom forbids her entering their house, because Olga is Puerto Rican.[156] In contrast, Maritza is only described as being beautiful. As the aforementioned traits are also Oscar's listed reasons for choosing to break up with Olga and keep dating Maritza, Oscar seems to be strongly affected by the Other's desire, represented by his mother and schoolmates, as he has to come to the realisation that certain people are more desirable to the public than others, and that he himself is also subject to the cultural hierarchy of desirability.

Subsequently, Oscar is thrust into a discourse of chauvinism and misogyny. When he is sad that he has to choose between his girlfriends, Belicia subjects Oscar to physical and verbal abuse, saying 'Tú ta llorando por una muchacha [you are crying for a girl]?' and hauling 'Oscar to his feet by his ear.'[157] In this way she demonstrates to Oscar that crying and expressing emotions are unacceptable traits in him, and that girls especially are not important enough to cry about. Furthermore, she tells him '[d]ale un galletazo [give her a slap],'to 'see if the little puta [whore] respects you.'[158] Instead of letting him express himself, Belicia

[156] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, pp. 13, 15.
[157] Ibid., p. 14.
[158] Ibid., p. 14.

recreates the sexist discourse she has learned from the Dominican Republic and encourages Oscar to treat women like objects, and exert physical violence if they do not do his bidding.

Oscar's uncle Rudolfo gives him similar advice, telling him that getting a girl 'will take care of *everything.* Start with a fea [ugly]. Coje that fea y metéselo [grab that ugly and insert it]!'[159] As his uncle is the closest thing Oscar has to a male role model in the novel, Oscar is strongly influenced by him, and novel depicts Oscar as clearly believing that having sex with a woman will change his life for the better. In his senior year in high school, he believes that being in a romantic relationship with Ana is 'his last fucking chance for happiness', and later he believes that meeting the semi-retired prostitute Ybón is 'the Higher Power's last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Domincan male-itude.'[160] Oscar seems to believe that having sexual activity with a woman has the ability to transform his life, similar to how his mother believes a romantic relationship with a wealthy male will transform her life. Any woman, or at least any woman approved by his male peers, will constitute the *objet petit a* for him. As the novel portrays several characters putting a lot of emphasis on Oscar's inability to have heterosexual relations, it seems that these characters would see Oscar in a different light if he could tell them of any heterosexual accomplishments of his, and that his life would change, at least to the point where his acquaintances would stop questioning him about his sex-life.

For the rest of his life, Oscar's attraction to girls is strongly influenced by the Other's desire. Oscar's desire, and thereby his *objet petit a*, is to validate his masculinity. Sepulveda writes:

> [Oscar's] community ostracizes him, which effectively subjects him to an epistemological violence: his failure to conform to a model of masculinity based on

[159] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 24, emphasis in original.
[160] Ibid., pp. 47, 283.

> accruing and objectifying women leads others to deprecate him for being allegedly "un-Dominican." To be a Dominican male is therefore equivalent to upholding the values of a hypersexual masculinity which Oscar indeed fails to embody.[161]

Oscar desires to be accepted as a Dominican male by his peers, and the way to be accepted is to embody hypersexual masculinity by having sexual relations with communally desired women. Hence, the women with whom Oscar is infatuated throughout the novel all seem to be confirmed as desirable by other men. The first of these women, Ana, enters his life 'under his radar', making him unable to 'level some wild-ass expectations her way'.[162] Put another way, Ana is not on Oscar's radar because no one has yet marked her as a woman to be desired, and consequently he does not have any extreme fantasies about her. However, once Oscar learns that she has an ex-boyfriend in the army, he can also see Ana as attractive, as she has proven worthy of male desire. Furthermore, as Ana's ex-boyfriend, Manny, is a skinny soldier, a recovering coke addict, and is violent towards Ana, he also embodies the aggressive and masculine traits that Oscar's mother and uncle encourage. Oscar subsequently falls in love with Ana, and keeps seeing her even when she reunites with Manny. The reason Oscar finds it so difficult to stay away from Ana, even when there is no chance she will be with him, is arguably because Manny represents several of the qualities Oscar lacks, such as aggression, dominance and a lack of emotion. These qualities seem impossible for Oscar to obtain by himself, and so he can only get closer to them through a conventional heterosexual relationship, in this case with Ana. When Ana reunites with Manny, Oscar gets to see the qualities he lacks up close, making it impossible for him to leave.

Oscar's desire is revealed in one of his daydreams about nuclear annihilation, where Oscar seduces Ana, shows aggression by shooting looters, is a 'take-charge genius' and has

[161] Sepulveda, 'Coding the Immigrant Experience', p. 20.
[162] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 36.

an 'ectomorphic physique'.[163] The traits he dreams of are strikingly similar to the traits of Manny, which begs the question whether Oscar's dream is about romantically conquering Ana, or about *becoming* Manny. Both Ana and Manny could in this case be seen to represent Oscar's *objet petit a*. Ana as *objet petit a* has the potential to make Oscar the kind of man who is respected because he has shown his ability to get a girlfriend and sexually prove himself. Manny as *objet petit a* brings forth the image of someone acting in the aggressive and dominant way that Oscar's believes his peer group expects. However, the notion that there are two different approaches to the *objet petit a* here are not that surprising, considering how, in the novel, aggressive masculinity and the ability to acquire a girlfriend are depicted as intertwined. As Lacan writes, 'desire presents itself in a position that can only be conceptualized on the basis of the metonymy determined by the existence of the signifying chain.'[164] There is a clear metonymic slippage between the novel's notion of a successful Dominican male and being successful in heterosexual relationships. Thus, the novel demonstrates that desire moves along the signifying chain and can therefore never be fully satisfied. Any *objet petit a* is just a single instance of desire amongst the signifying chain.

With Oscar's next love interest, Jenni Muñoz, his pattern of responding to the desire of other men repeats itself. Jenni is a shared object of desire at the university, with Yunior writing '[e]ven I was hot for Jenni', adding that 'every standard a dude like me had, this diabla [she-devil] short-circuited'.[165] Oscar falling in love with a conventionally attractive woman is not surprising. However, this attraction is different. When Oscar walks in on Jenni having sex with someone else, Oscar goes 'berserk', to the point where Yunior has to put him in a headlock to calm him down.[166] Furthermore, this episode launches Oscar into a

[163] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 42.
[164] Jacques Lacan, *Transference: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VIII* (1991), ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017) p. 169.
[165] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 182, comma in original.
[166] Ibid., p. 187.

depression and a failed suicide attempt. Considering that Oscar has previously been in love with Ana while she was in a relationship with someone else, it seems odd that being rejected by Jenni affects him so much more strongly. There seems to be two main reasons why this is the case. The first is that Oscar knows Jenni has rejected Yunior before.[167] With his physical strength, colloquial language and many sexual conquests, Yunior embodies the Dominican masculine ideal that Oscar has been taught. As not even Yunior is successful in approaching Jenni, she is built up to an unapproachable ideal, as a desire that cannot ever be satisfied. Oscar knows that he has very small chances of building a romantic relationship with Jenni, yet if he does, he will be successful where Yunior is not, making him the ideal man. Jenni thus represents an *objet petit a* for Oscar that is alluringly close, yet completely unattainable.

The other main reason why Oscar's falling out with Jenni provokes such an extreme reaction from him is because of the nature of the man she chooses to be with instead of Oscar. The unnamed man is described as 'the tall punk kid who used to hang around Demarest, wasn't a resident, crashed with whatever girl would let him. Thin as Lou Reed, and as arrogant. He was showing her a yoga thing and she was laughing.'[168] The man, henceforth called "the punk", does not embody any of the masculine traits idealised by Oscar's culture. Although he is tall and arrogant, which are qualities Oscar does not share, "the punk" does not seem to have his own home, implying he is not very responsible. Adding the fact that he shows Jenni how to do yoga, which would arguably be considered a feminine and unusual activity by Oscar's contemporaries, "the punk" does not constitute any masculine ideal for Oscar. Oscar is used to having other men entering the relationships he desires, but in Jenni's case, the man she chooses over Oscar is not embodying the Dominican masculine ideal any better than Oscar.

[167] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 184.
[168] Ibid., p. 186.

Consequently, Oscar's disappointment is twofold. Firstly, he is let down by the notion that Jenni choose someone that Oscar thinks could be beneath him. Hence, Oscar's confidence becomes even lower than usual after the incident.

The second aspect to Oscar's disappointment is that in choosing to be with "the punk", Jenni removes herself from Oscar's *objet petit a*. As with his attraction to Ana, Oscar's attraction to Jenni stems a lot from the fact that Jenni is able to reject Yunior and other men who encompass the paragon of masculinity that Oscar lacks. However, when Jenni decides to have sexual relations with someone like "the punk", Oscar can no longer identify her as someone who can pick and choose the most masculine partner, as she instead becomes someone who favours misfits. Oscar realises that if Jenni had indeed chosen Oscar as her partner it would not have been because he embodied her notion of the masculine ideal, but because she saw him as an interesting misfit. Therefore, Jenni no longer triggers Oscar's desire. He is still attracted to her because of her beauty, but the idea of being with her no longer holds the fantasy of succeeding where more masculine men had failed, making Oscar unable to use her as a way of proving himself more masculine than Yunior and men like him. Oscar's extreme anger is his reaction to Jenni's rejection of the Dominican discourse where the most attractive women couple with the most masculine men. Accordingly, Oscar can no longer use Jenni as an object to fulfil his masculine fantasies, thus exposing how his desire is intrinsically linked to misogynistic attitudes. Jenni no longer contains as much of Oscar's *objet petit a,* because if Oscar eventually coupled with her, he would no longer be a paragon of masculinity, but rather one of Jenni's odd love interests.

The situation between Oscar and his next love interest, Nataly, has much in common with the incident between him, Jenni and "the punk". Yunior depicts their interaction as follows:

> His only friend on the staff was another secular, a twenty-nine-year-old alterna-latina named Nataly (yes, she reminded him of Jenni, minus the outrageous pulchritude, minus the smolder). Nataly had spent four years in a mental hospital (nerves, she said) and was an avowed Wiccan. Her boyfriend, Stan the Can, whom she'd met in the nuthouse ("our honeymoon") worked as an EMS technician, and Nataly told Oscar that the bodies Stan the Can saw splattered on the streets turned him on for some reason. […] Despite Nataly's homeliness and the medicated fog she inhabited, Oscar entertained some pretty strange Harold Lauder fantasies about her. Since she was not hot enough, in his mind, to date openly, he imagined them in one of those twisted bedroom-only relationships.[169]

This passage implies that Oscar has issues both with Nataly's perceived desirability, and with her choice of partners. Yunior writing that Oscar did not consider Nataly hot enough to date suggests that the issue is less about Nataly's physical appearance and more about Oscar having no male gaze present to approve Nataly's desirability. As there are no men available to approve of Nataly's desirability, she does not contain Oscar's *objet petit a* of having his masculine identity validated. While Oscar was a child, he had no problem being in a relationship with Olga, even though he knew she was not conventionally attractive. Yet, with Nataly, Oscar is too concerned about the opinions of others to imagine having a proper relationship with her. Consequently, his fantasies of her are limited to a secret relationship, because while he desires her physically, he does not see his masculinity more validated by her, due to her apparently not being hot enough.

Furthermore, the fact that her current boyfriend, Stan, is exceedingly strange, being turned on by bodies splattered on the street, and being a former mental hospital patient, means

[169] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 265.

that Oscar would be even less flattered by any hypothetical relationship with Nataly. Stan is the only other person with an implicit desire for Nataly in the novel, and he does not adhere to the masculine ideal that Oscar desires. Oscar is thus less attracted to Nataly, because he has no desire to be similar to Stan. Accordingly, Oscar knows that if he publicly admits to desiring Nataly, he will have to identify with Stan, forcing him away from his *objet petit a* of having his masculinity validated. Oscar's desire for women is arguably as much dictated by other men's desire for them as by his own attraction towards them, showing how hisdesire is in the field of the Other.

As Oscar's desire is in the field of the Other, his final and strongest attraction is directed towards a prostitute. Yunior first introduces Ybón Pimentel, Oscar's new beloved, as the neighbour of La Inca. However, La Inca herself becomes a narrator for a brief chapter saying Oscar did not meet Ybón 'on the street like he told you. His cousins, los idiotas, took him to a cabaret and that's where he first saw her.'[170] Since a cabaret is a place men go specifically to observe beautiful women, Ybón is already marked by other men's desire when Oscar is introduced to her. However, Oscar lying to Yunior about how he met Ybón suggests an implicit shame. Clearly, Oscar believes that in order to prove his masculinity a woman has to have sex with him out of free will, not because he has paid her. Oscar's *objet petit a* is to have his masculinity validated due to his own merits, not because he has enough money to pay a sex worker. Thus, the novel reveals how Oscar's *objet petit a* of having sex for the first time is less about the actual act of sex and much more about being desired in return, and the implied validation.

Furthermore, Oscar and Ybón's relationship is highly characterised by the presence of other men. Yunior writes:

[170] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 289.

> The third time Oscar came over, Ybón doubled up on the scotches again and then took down her photo albums from the closet and showed him all the pictures of herself when she'd been sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, always on a beach, always in an early-eighties bikini, always with big hair, always smiling, always with her arms around some middle-aged eighties yakoub. Looking at those old hairy blancos, Oscar couldn't help but feel hopeful. […] Each photo had a date and a place at the bottom and this was how he was able to follow Ybón's puta's progress through Italy, Portugal and Spain.[171]

Oscar's hopefulness can be interpreted as him realising that he is not any less attractive than any of Ybón's usual partners, making him believe that he is an eligible choice for her. However, when considering how the final sentence refers to Ybón's background as a prostitute, the passage also suggests that Oscar is excited about Ybón having been desired by many men, making her a suitable object for him to use to prove his masculinity.

In a similar manner, Ybón's Dominican boyfriend, going by the name the capitán, represents the hypersexual masculine ideal Oscar longs for. Yunior writes that the capitán is a 'tall, arrogant, acerbically handsome' man that 'most of the planet feels inferior to', adding that 'because he was methodical and showed absolutely no mercy to the leftists, he was launched—no, vaulted—into the top ranks of the military police.'[172] The capitán is handsome, dominant, and ruthless, thus maintaining the qualities necessary to be considered a Dominican masculine ideal in the novel. He clearly incorporates the *objet petit a* for Oscar, who even utilises the capitán's anger as a way of legitimising the romantic character of his and Ybón's friendship. Yunior writes that Oscar 'realized, rather unhelpfully, that had he and Ybón not been serious the capitán would probably never have fucked with him. Proof positive that he

[171] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 286.
[172] Ibid., p. 294.

and Ybón had a relationship.'[173] Thus, Oscar depicts the capitán as a rival for Ybón's affection, essentially creating a narrative where Oscar and the capitán are equals. This realisation arguably fuels his resolution to go back to the Dominican Republic and have a relationship with Ybón.

Oscar's decision to go back to the Dominican Republic and see Ybón is also clearly influenced by his favourite media. As he believes himself and the capitán to be romantic rivals, he can easily project himself into a classical hero narrative where Oscar is the protagonist and the capitán is the antagonist. Seeng himself as the hero of a narrative lets Oscar put himself in a highly masculine role, thus enabling his *objet petit a.* This narrative is also supported by the fact that Oscar himself has described Ybón as 'some marooned alien princess who existed partially in another dimension'.[174] As such, Ybón helps him build the hero narrative he desires. Yunior also notes how, before deciding to return to the Dominican Republic, Oscar 'watched *Virus* for the thousandth time and for the thousandth time teared up when the Japanese scientist finally reached Tierra del Fuego and the love of his life.'[175] Helena Machado Sáez argues that '[t]hese cinematic narratives—*Robotech* and *Virus*—model the romance that Oscar seeks unsuccessfully, in his own life.'[176] Hence, Oscar is influenced by a narrative of a male hero overcoming obstacles to return to his beloved, believing that if he returns to Ybón despite the dangers, he will be like the Japanese scientist in *Virus.* Consequently, Oscar's *objet petit a* is strongly influenced by the narratives common to his favourite media.

Oscar's desire to see himself participating in some grander narrative continues when he arrives in the Dominican Republic. When Clives questions Oscar's return, Oscar answers

[173] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 303.
[174] Ibid., p. 282.
[175] Ibid., p. 307.
[176] Helena Machado Sáez, 'Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance', *Contemporary Literature*, 52, 3 (2011), 522-555, p. 536.

'It's the Ancient Powers […] They won't leave me alone.'[177] By suggesting that he is part of some grander narrative, with unknown forces having agency over him, Oscar can imply that his attraction to Ybón is elevated beyond themselves. Oscar's belief in this narrative also gives him a new authority, as revealed in the following exchange, where La Inca asks Oscar to return to New Jersey: 'His abuela tried to exert her power, tried to use the Voice, but he was no longer the boy she'd known. Something had changed about him. He had gotten some power of his own.'[178] Just as his mother's relationship to the Gangster transformed her behaviour, Oscar's belief in his love for Ybón has transformed him. However, in Oscar's case, the novel suggests that there is something supernatural at play, invoking the genres of mythology and fantasy, such as the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, which are referenced throughout the novel. Oscar believes he is a different person, due to his alleged relationship with Ybón, implying that he believes so much in the sexual consumption with her and its inherent *objet petit a* that this radically alters his behaviour. Sáez writes that, for Oscar, 'Ybón's love has effected a transformation that cannot be reversed by his murder; even death cannot undo his newfound belonging through sex.'[179] In this case, Oscar uses the *objet petit a* in his relationship to change himself.

However, Oscar's early demise suggests that his transformation into a more masculine and authoritative character is essentially an illusion. Prior to his murder, Oscar gives a long speech to his murderers, the capitán's henchmen:

> 'He told them that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world. […] He told them about Ybón and the way he loved her […] He told them that it was only because of her love that he'd been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop, told them if they killed

[177] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, p. 315.
[178] Ibid., p. 319.
[179] Sáez, 'Dictating Desire', p. 538.

> him they would probably feel nothing and their children would probably feel nothing either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he'd be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream (he put his hand up) you can be.'[180]

Oscar's speech suggests that he believes his coming murder will elevate him into some kind of superhero saint, waiting for the henchmen on the "other side" to pass his judgement onto them, akin to the heroes commonly depicted in the genres of fantasy, science fiction and superhero novels he consumes. As Joori Joyce Lee points out, during his final speech 'Oscar devolves into the language of traditional American superheroes that is operated by a set of clichés and stereotypical images and inhibits a proliferation of meanings.'[181] Following Lee, this dissertation argues that rather than being a display of agency, Oscar's speech is simply a reproduction of a superhero cliché, since, while Oscar believes himself to be transformed, the clichéd nature of his speech suggests he is still an inept geek, with grandiose delusions. Oscar apparently believes that the agency received from finally acquiring his *objet petit a* gives him supernatural powers. The importance of the romantic *objet petit a* is exaggerated so much throughout the novel that when Oscar finally achieves it, he stops thinking rationally.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined how Oscar's cultural and familial influences cause him to perceive the *objet petit a* in possible heterosexual relationships. Through Trujillo and Belicia, the novel establishes how characters believe relationships can influence their agency and power. Furthermore, the novel establishes a metonymic link between heterosexual relationships and hypermasculine behaviour. Hence, Oscar experiences his *objet petit a* in

[180] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, pp. 321-322.
[181] Joori Joyce Lee, 'Invoking Joyce, Avoiding Imitation: Junot Díaz's Portrait of Nerds in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao'*, *ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 47, 3 (2016), 23-43, p. 40.

possible partners who have had their desirability confirmed by other men. In particular, he seems attracted to women with very masculine partners, and his attraction is due to his desire to be considered equal to these romantic rivals. Additionally, Oscar attempts to model his behaviour after that of the protagonists in his favourite genres. When returning to Ybón, Oscar sees himself analogous to the heroes of these stories, giving up everything to be with the woman he loves, even though he knows it will lead to his demise. Hence, the *objet petit a* he perceives in being like the protagonists in the media he consumes, combined with the *objet petit a* he perceives in the most sought after women, arguably causes his demise, as they cause him to believe that the only value he can get out of his life is to sacrifice it for love. A very brief glimpse of Oscar resisting the Other's desire and maintaining his own, is when he realises 'what got him was not the bam-bam-bam of sex—it was the little intimacies that he'd never in his whole life anticipated'. [182] However, at this point his fate is sadly made.

[182] Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life,* p. 334.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the representations of love in three novels by deconstructing the romantic attractions according to Lacanian theories about subjectivity. Specifically, the dissertation has explored how, in these novels, the notion of the *objet petit a* can help explain how, through the Symbolic order, romantic attractions are used as ways of self-expression. Furthermore, the dissertation has examined how certain characters' desires eventually become influenced by the Other's desire, essentially also influencing their *objet petit a*. Lacan's paradigm also reveals contrasts between a queer approach to *the objet petit a* and a heteronormative approach.

When comparing the Lacanian analysis of the three different novels, there are a couple of similarities that stand out. One such similarity is that between Celie in *The Color Purple* and Archibald in *Poor Things*, if one adheres to Victoria's narrative and reads Archibald as queer. In this case, they are both queer characters whose *objet petit a* is being validated. Celie has a strong desire to be validated as a good person who does not deserve all the abuse she has received from her stepfather and husband, and is thus attracted to Shug Avery, who fulfils this desire. Archibald desires to have his tender and domestic side recognised and valued, and is attracted to Godwin and Victoria, hoping to get this validation from them. Unlike Victoria, whose *objet petit a* is to become like Godwin, or Oscar, whose *objet petit a* is to have his masculinity validated, Archibald's and Celie's desires do not amount to fulfilling some exterior criteria. Instead, their desire is the affirmation that they do not have to change, as Celie desires to know that she was a good person all along, and Archibald wants to be homebound rather than a hardworking doctor like Victoria and Godwin.

As Archibald and Celie are both primarily attracted to members of the same sex, the characterisation of them suggests that a queer person's *objet petit a* may represent affirmation, rather than proving themselves through external conquests. However, while Celie is

successful in seeking this affirmation, gaining confidence and independence from her relationship with Shug, Archibald never gets the affirmation he desires. Although he marries the woman he desires, and inherits the estate of the man he desires, he is never fully loved by either person, which leads to his harbouring enough resentment to write a manuscript where they are both dehumanised.

In contrast to Celie and Archibald, the heterosexual characters in the analysed novels seek relationships as a way of changing themselves. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Oscar quite evidently desires to have his masculinity approved through a heterosexual relationship, as his *objet petit a* is to be equal to other men. Harpo's *objet petit a* in *The Color Purple* is similarly linked to the behaviour of his wife, as he desires for her to do as he tells her, and to be able to beat her in a physical fight. In his own narrative, where Archibald presents himself as heterosexual, his *objet petit a* is linked to proving himself equal to the upper-class men he meets at Glasgow University. Similarly, Belicia's *objet petit a* in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is to enter an upper-class life of luxury and leisure, hence her desiring men who exude wealth. All these presumably heterosexual characters desire partners as a way of change, either to better themselves, as Archibald and Belicia do, or to prove themselves as patriarchs, as Harpo and Oscar do. If one reads Victoria's narrative in *Poor Things* as valid, then Archibald never quite becomes a fully-fledged member of the middle-class. Similarly, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* Belicia is never able to become wealthy through her relationships. In *The Color Purple,* Harpo never manages to physically overwhelm his wife; instead he learns to accept her difference from other women. Similarly, the ending of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, with Oscar preferring the little intimacies of his relationship with Ybón over the sex itself, suggests that Oscar was about to realise that he did not have to conform to the cultural norms of hypermasculinity to have a successful relationship.

Altogether, these novels seem to suggest that for heterosexual characters, the *objet petit a* present in romantic attraction tends to involve adhering to external qualities, as opposed to the validation of internal qualities sought after in the aforementioned queer relationships. One reason for the difference between the queer and heterosexual paradigms is the presence of heteronormativity. As heterosexuality is expected of the characters, and of the authors too, they are also exposed to discourses specifying what a heterosexual relationship should entail, and what sort of heterosexual partner is most desirable. Moreover, heteronormativity also assumes a competition for the most attractive mates. Hence, the characters are taught an ostensibly false narrative where a suitable partner can transform one's life, and that one is required to meet certain standards in romantic relationships. Consequently, the aforementioned heterosexual characters believe a conventional relationship is necessary to prove oneself to be an accomplished person or to elevate one's status in society, essentially revealing how their desire is affected by the Other.

Contrastingly, queer individuals discover that their romantic attractions are radically different from the expectations created by heteronormativity. As a result, their romantic attractions teach them to resist the Other's desire. Furthermore, as there are no expectations or narratives suggesting how they should express their queerness in relationships, these individuals have fewer guidelines concerning what a relationship should entail for them. Additionally, these individuals likely desire to have their difference acknowledged and validated, suggesting the *objet petit a* they perceive in attractions amount to having their divergent feelings and qualities understood and appreciated, thus representing more individual desires.

Similarly to the queer characters, the female characters in the examined novels also more readily resist the Other's desire, pursuing their individual desires instead. In addition to Celie, both Shug Avery and Victoria all break conventions when reaching for their *objets petit*

a, whether it means that they have a more liberal approach to sexual relations, or that they encompass traditionally masculine behaviour, such as becoming a doctor during the late Victorian period. The only exception is Belicia in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, whose *objet petit a* represents more conventional values. Generally, however, these novels seem to suggest that women are better at resisting the Other's desire than men. As there is a majority of masculine voices in the examined novels, as well as mostly unconventional female voices, it could be argued that this thesis is lacking when it comes to represent a more conventional female voice. The focus on unconventional women in the novels studied suggests that modern literature favours depictions of such women, although the scope of three novels is too narrow to confirm that claim.

While Lacan's ideas can be used to examine a character's potential psyche and desires in a very detailed manner, as this thesis has done, his ideas limit themselves to an individual, mostly psychotherapeutic level. Just like any philosophical paradigm, Lacan's ideas are merely theories, and can therefore be questioned as to whether or not they offer any real insight. Furthermore, as his ideas rely on the existence of a subconsciousness, the subjectivity Lacan argues for is essentially esoteric. However, other paradigms influenced by Lacan's ideas, such as Judith Butler's ideas on gender performativity, and Louis Althusser's notions of interpellation, can be used to examine influences on love and desire on a more expansive level. As these paradigms concern themselves with group behaviour, they lend themselves better to arguments of why people generally act the way they do. However, as Lacan's paradigm offer a comprehensive approach to subjectivity, his theories enable a highly detailed analysis of characters, as I have done here.

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