

M. A. Newton

Sexual Trauma, Psychosis, and Betrayal in Antonia White’s

Autobiographical Fiction:

A Critical Examination of the Freudian Perspective

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School of Health and Related Research

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Abstract

In Catholic writer Antonia White’s series of autobiographical novels, *Frost in May*, *The Lost Traveller*, *The Sugar House*, and *Beyond the Glass*, readers are presented with a Freudian Oedipal drama that sends the main protagonist spiraling into psychosis and then back into her father’s arms upon recovery. This trajectory draws a parallel with White’s history. Literary critics and biographers on White have suggested that she was a victim of father-daughter incest. My aim in this thesis, however, is not to prove that White was a victim of sexual abuse. I seek to illustrate the limitations and possibilities of validating sexual trauma in autobiographical fiction using White’s diaries as scaffolding for this examination.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One is an analysis of a problematic Oedipal drama in White’s autobiographical fiction that leads to a proposed theoretical conundrum in psychoanalytical concepts of sexual trauma and psychosis. Chapter Two is a study of the form and theory of the autobiographical novel and the author-protagonist relationship. Also, at the intersection of psychoanalytic and literary theoretical paradigms, I explore the extent to which White’s metaphorical descriptions of psychosis generate a coherent depiction of self and lived traumatic experience within the confines of an Oedipal narrative. In so doing, I propose a space be carved for White’s experiences to be taken seriously as authentic expressions of trauma. Chapter Three explores larger socio-cultural patriarchal attitudes of women’s sexuality in which I draw parallels between Freud’s construction of the incest barrier and religious notions of female sexuality. In Chapter Four I juxtapose literary and clinical writings of contemporary trends on sexual trauma, memory, and betrayal to illustrate the shifts in focus and yet subtle presence of Freud’s Oedipus complex theory in Western society today.

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Formerly, the man of science often made merry of the naiveté of the novelist-poet who, when puzzled for an ending, simply made his hero mad, and now to our shame we have to acknowledge that it was not the scholars but the naïve poets who were right. Psycho-analysis showed us that an individual who finds no way out of his mental conflict takes refuge in a neurosis or psychosis.

– Sándor Ferenczi[[1]](#footnote-1)

We tell ourselves stories in order to live, or to justify taking lives,   
even our own, by violence or by numbness and the failure to live;  
tell ourselves stories that save us and stories that are the quicksand  
in which we thrash and the well in which we drown, stories of   
justification, of accursedness, of luck and star-crossed love, or  
versions clad in the cynicism that is at times a very elegant garment.  
- Rebecca Solnit[[2]](#footnote-2)

Behind the story I tell is the one I don’t. Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear…. Behind sex is rage, behind anger is love, behind this moment is silence, years of silence – Dorothy Allison[[3]](#footnote-3)

Introduction

*(Auto)Biographical Information on Antonia White − Conflicting Psychoanalytical Theories of Sexual Trauma – A Crisis of Self-Expression in White’s Autobiographical Fiction – Socio-Cultural Notions of Female Sexuality Contemporary Trends on Sexual Trauma, Memory, and Betrayal*

**(Auto)Biographical Information on Antonia White**

Antonia White was born on 31 March, 1899, the only child to Cecil Botting and Christine White. Cecil was head of the Classics Department at St. Paul’s School, London, and a strict disciplinarian. Christine hoped that her daughter would be christened Cynthia, but her father decided upon Eirene, a Greek spelling of the more common name Irene. In *As Once in May* (1993)*—*White’s only attempt at a major non-fiction autobiography*—*she reflects upon how her father did not get the son he had hoped for but had, nonetheless, fostered high intellectual hopes for her. He believed that an archaic spelling of her name would mirror his ambitions of her following in his footsteps. A reason for his choice in the spelling stemmed from his belief that his daughter would not get married but enter the education profession as a tutor or Classics mistress at Cambridge University where he studied as an undergraduate. Cecil was confident that not many men would be interested in marrying such an ambitious woman who would threaten typical male-dominated roles as heads of institutions (White 188). White never taught at Cambridge, although she was to teach briefly at a couple of schools and later take a post as a writer-in-residence at St. Mary's College, Indiana. She also did get married*—*four times*—*but all her marriages ended disastrously.

Entering womanhood against the backdrop of World War I had adverse effects on White’s relationship with her father. Cecil was emotionally devastated by the war; he would hear of many of his past students’ deaths. Unable to cope with their deaths, he kept photographs that he made into beautiful albums, often expressing his regret that it was not his life taken by war instead of theirs. His students’ deaths created, or perhaps renewed, a sense of profound guilt that was to plague the relationship with his daughter. His attachment to past students, coupled with his newfound devotion to Catholicism that favoured religious conformity over the individuality of the self, suffocated White as she became a victim to her father's sacrosanct conventionality and intense desire for a son.

Cecil converted to Catholicism when White was seven years old. Six months after Cecil converted, he sent White to the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Roehampton, Surrey. As documented in her autobiography, *As Once in May*, White recalls that, although the experience was not an unhappy one for the most part, the nuns were intent on eradicating what they perceived to be a ‘dangerous independence of mind’ (155). White was groomed to anticipate a world outside the convent walls ‘with its Satan-set traps of heresy, free thought and easy morals, and the whole object of our education was to arm against its snares’ (155). Vanity was strictly monitored and found to be abhorrent, and yet it was White’s vanity that would deeply affect the relationship with her father. White’s time at the convent was a pivotal moment in the young convert’s relationship with her father, a time of feeling extreme disappointment on his side and extreme rejection on hers.

White began writing her first novel whilst in residence at the Convent of the Sacred Heart. It was her only non-autobiographical novel about a young adult’s flirtations with a hedonist admirer, but on her fifteenth birthday was discovered by the nuns. Brought before the nuns and her parents, White did not get a chance to explain the ‘magnificent conversions I had arranged for the later chapters; I was accused of perversity, corruption and indecency’ (‘A Child of the Five Wounds’ 161). White’s father was so disgusted with the novel’s contents that it resulted in emotional estrangement from his daughter. This traumatic event in White's life affected her so profoundly that she could not put pen to paper for nearly twenty years. It was only after her father’s death that she felt the need to revisit this traumatic event in her first in a sequence of autobiographical novels, *Frost in May* (1933).

By self-admission, White’s vanity inspired her to write *Frost in May*. Vanity was a trait that friends and family would remember above all others; it was also a trait she shared with her mother, Christine. White’s mother never behaved in a way that typifies a good mother, one who nurtures her child in a way that produces a socially responsible human being. In *Antonia White: A Life* (2000), White’s biographer Jane Dunn observes that, when White was a young girl, she and her mother seemed to behave more like peers by playing games and giggling. Christine neglected to be a responsible mother in favour of identifying and competing with her daughter instead (Dunn 20). Towards the end of her life, Christine became preoccupied with her own beauty, but to her daughter, it reeked of artificiality. In a diary entry dated 15 August, 1937, White’s condescending pity for her mother’s situation is evident, and yet also feels frighteningly familiar:

A visit to my mother is always upsetting. For a few minutes one establishes a contact, then she is back in her endless repetition fantasies. The house grows dirtier and dirtier and she with it. An open sore on her neck, drifts of powder, her cheap clothes crushed and soiled, her hair bright, soft and curly as a young girl’s. Her nails half eaten away, patched with nail varnish. The terrible sense of sweet decay. I am sorry for her life, yet exasperated. She is perfectly happy in her dreams of loves. She talks of nothing but sex. With a giggle she tells me, in veiled language, that she masturbates. I felt the seeds of something very much like her in me and am horrified. (101)

White draws a complex relationship between mother and daughter in her autobiographical novels, in which descriptions of neglect, rejection, and revenge are in abundance. Christine was absent from White’s life on numerous occasions, most often due to stints in nursing homes to calm her nerves and recover from bouts of severe depression. Christine had a fragile and childlike disposition that was also not conducive to effective mothering. Christine lost her mother when she was just two-and-a-half months old. Perhaps as a result of this loss, she did not have a maternal model upon which to develop good nurturing skills. In *The Lost Traveller* (1950), White poignantly describes Christine’s lack of effective mothering: Clara confesses that, upon seeing her mother in bed with depression and a nurse at hand, ‘She could not remember ever having loved her mother and what she felt now was mainly pity’ (90).

White’s relationship with her two daughters continued the pattern of maternal neglect that White experienced in her childhood. Susan and Lyndall’s childhood was one of abandonment and cruelty. In *Now to My Mother* (1985), Susan describes how her nurse (nanny) administered frequent spankings and took one of the daughters out of the nursery whilst leaving the other in it, sometimes for hours at a time. In her desperate need for maternal attention, Susan habitually and ferociously sucked her thumb. Susan recalls how her nurse tried many different things to stop Susan from sucking her thumb, from tying the ‘offending member in a cotton bag’ to coating it in ‘bitter aloes’ (47). Nothing worked. Susan’s mother, in the meantime, was nowhere to be found. When she was around, Susan needed an invite to see her (49). In *Nothing to Forgive* (1988), Lyndall also describes White as a neglectful mother who did not seem to know who her daughter was ‘because you ignored me in babyhood, terrorised me in childhood, and slighted me in adolescence’ (3). There is a pattern in which history repeats itself. In White's inability to overcome dysfunction in her relationship with her mother, her past is tragically reenacted in her relationships with her daughters.

A traumatic experience during Christine’s marriage to Cecil may have led to or increased existing levels of depression that could have been a contributing factor to her inability to nurture her daughter. Cecil was desperate for a son, but before having his daughter, Christine delivered three stillborn daughters. Perhaps in reaction to how her previous pregnancies turned out, Christine told her daughter that in labor, ‘you go down to the gates of Hell’ (Dunn 18). In her memoir, *Nothing to Forgive*, White’s younger daughter Lyndall Hopkinson explains how ‘three months before my mother was born, around Christmas time, Christine had tried to kill herself. Cecil had come home very drunk after a convivial evening with his old Cambridge friends and had done something which so distressed his wife that she had taken an overdose’ (Hopkinson 22). Lyndall claims not to know why Christine took an overdose. However, in old age, Christine repeatedly told White it was because Cecil had raped her in a drunken state (Dunn 17). White revisited her mother's story time and time again in an attempt to understand her own neuroses with childbirth (18).

Like her mother’s marriage to Cecil, White’s marriages were fraught with sexual difficulties. Her first marriage was perhaps the most traumatic. On 28 April, 1921, she married Reginald (Reggie) Green-Wilkinson, an alcoholic (63). Just over a year into the marriage, they went through a two-year annulment process due to non-consummation. White blamed herself for her failed marriage. *The Sugar House* (1952) provides a detailed semi-autobiographical account of White’s marriage to Reggie, in which Clara, her fictional self, tells Archie (Reggie), ‘I don’t deserve to be loved.… I really believe I’m a kind of monster. Not a real person at all’ (White 174). White notes, in a diary entry dated 27 August, 1938, that not long after the annulment she had a mental breakdown, one that had been brewing since a year before she married Reggie (149).

On 17 November, 1922, twenty-three-year-old Antonia White was admitted into a mental institution, Bethlem Royal Hospital. She was discharged nine months later. White’s engaging exploration into her madness is documented in her autobiographical short story, ‘The House of Clouds’ (1928), and her final completed autobiographical novel, *Beyond the Glass* (1954). In these narratives, White’s alter-egos, Helen and Clara, respectively, are haunted by psychotic delusions and hallucinations that infiltrate their waking lives. At the core of Clara’s delusions, in particular, are allusions to a father who seems to be a barrier to her engaging in healthy romantic relationships with possible suitors. This barrier suggests deep Oedipal ties between father and daughter.

Literary critics suggest that Antonia White was sexually abused by her father. For instance, in ‘Antonia White and the Subversion of Literary Impotence at Hayford Hall’ (2005), Jeffery writes,

The suggestion that White may have been a victim of sexual abuse in childhood has been discussed by Mary Lynn Broe and Elizabeth Podnieks, and the possibility is not discounted by White’s own daughter, Susan Chitty…. Podnieks’s proposal that it was the abuse that caused … writer’s block can be reinforced by the fact that when attempting to write her autobiography, White could not progress her text beyond the age of four years. (81)

All this material provides an opportunity to gain insight into White's problematic relationships with her parents. Whilst White's autobiography does not progress beyond a young age, her autobiographical fiction and diaries continue her own analysis into her traumatic relationships and experiences. By using White’s diaries as scaffolding, a new line of inquiry serves to illustrate limitations and possibilities of validating sexual trauma in White’s autobiographical fiction.

Nowhere in White’s literature does she categorically state that sexual abuse occurred, although she alludes to it in very subtle terms. There is one statement, but it is steeped in ambiguity. During White’s years spent in Freudian analysis with Dennis Carroll, she writes the following diary entry dated 28 June, 1938: ‘I couldn’t have had intercourse with [my father] … because presumably apart from morals … he didn’t want it’ (*Diaries 1926-1957* 140). It is difficult to interpret this statement. Could White be saying, *it just was not possible, despite my wanting to;* or, *it could not really have happened, despite my thinking it might have?* Readers will never know for sure. Still, what is worthy of mention is Chitty's explanation on the subject. In the Introduction to White's second volume of diaries, *Antonia White: Diaries 1958-1979* (1992), Chitty observes how White's dreams may provide a clue to the possibility that White was sexually abused: ‘During her three periods of psychoanalysis (with Dr. Carroll, Dorothy Kingsmill and Dr. Ploye), the dreams become exceptionally vivid. Most vivid of all was a dream ... in which she was ritually raped by her father and actually felt him penetrate her. It is hard not to suspect that Cecil may have, even if only to a small degree, sexually abused Antonia as a child.... It is known that his wife was frigid’ (9). That being said, a wife’s frigidity does not necessarily mean that the husband is going to seek sexual relations with his daughter; and without a confession from the perpetrator, proving sexual abuse occurred is extremely difficult.

**Conflicting Psychoanalytical Theories of Sexual Trauma**

It is not my aim in this thesis to prove that White was a victim of father-daughter incest. Through a psychoanalytic lens, one aim is to examine the limitations and possibilities of validating sexual abuse in her history in an examination of her autobiographical fiction, against the backdrop of her diaries and critics’ observations. What emerges in this examination are conflicting psychoanalytical positions on sexual trauma that shed light on theoretical problems in an analysis of sexual trauma. A central question arises, which I will address in Chapter One: through a psychoanalytic lens, is White’s autobiographical fiction a viable avenue for the unconscious documentation of sexual trauma? In reply, I find myself, to some extent, answering in the affirmative. It is not because I can prove that White engaged in incestuous relations with her father; it is because a Freudian approach to sexual trauma restricts the possibility of other conclusions to be drawn from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Prior to the development of Freud’s Oedipus complex, Freud wrote two monumental works, *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) and ‘The Aetiology of Hysteria’ (1896). In ‘The Aetiology of Hysteria’, Freud describes the devastating impact sexual abuse has on a child’s mental and emotional development. He makes the claim that patients who suffer from hysteria may do so as a result of an earlier sexually traumatic experience in childhood by persons who are ‘debauched’ and ‘impotent’ (214). What Freud plainly states is that because the relationship between victim and aggressor is founded on love, it is a seductive means used by the aggressor that enables the sexual relationship to develop. In Freud’s earlier work, *Studies on Hysteria*, however, although Freud and Breuer do not effectively elaborate upon the cases themselves, they arrive at what they believe to be satisfactory conclusions on sexual abuse cases with regard to their female patients. They make it clear that it is not uncommon for females to experience sexual excitation during an assault because they have a particular sexual disposition for it. In contrast with a case of a twelve-year-old boy who was sexually assaulted in a public bathroom but who was able to intellectualise his hysterical symptoms that followed the assault, a seventeen-year-old woman had been brutally assaulted by a man on a staircase in the dark. Breuer inserts into his story that the young woman had been ‘sexually excited’ by these brutal assaults and ‘(Here we have the factor of disposition)’ (256). In other words, it is in-built in her psycho-sexual constitution. This derogatory view progresses into more definite references to a woman’s low moral fortitude throughout Freud’s career. It seems to me that the seed of the Oedipus complex had already been sown before Freud’s seduction theory; this may explain one reason why the seduction theory was short-lived. A more overt reason given later was that there were just too many cases coming forward of incestuous sexual abuse that they could not possibly be true.

With regard to the Oedipus complex, Freud’s interpretation of sexual trauma pertains to a child’s natural psycho-sexual development that is fraught with sexual difficulties as the child navigates the Oedipus complex. This theory goes through a series of modifications, but a staple feature and underlying premise of the Oedipus complex is that the little boy experiences castration anxiety until he learns to take pride in his manhood (although he simultaneously has a residue of an erotic fixation on women). The little girl’s psycho-sexual development is different: she has already been castrated by her mother and experiences penis envy until she is able to bear a child as a symbolic offering to her father. The ultimate aim for the child, upon entering adolescence and a revival of Oedipal wishes, is to internalise social norms via mechanisms of guilt and thus proceed into healthy, constructive relations with significant love objects that will replace the original Oedipal ones.

In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dated 27 October, 1897, Freud confidently asserts that the Oedipus complex derives from the premise that ‘conscience is [a child’s] unconscious sense of guilt’ (273). Freud's publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) is a pivotal work that develops his premise in association with wishful thinking and dream fulfillment, at the source of which is often sexual anxiety: ‘To express the matter boldly, it is as though a sexual preference becomes active at an early period, as though the boy regards his father as a rival in love, as though the girl takes the same attitude toward her mother—a rival by getting rid of whom he or she cannot but profit’ (252). Passage through the Oedipus complex is not without its complications. Failure to resolve the Oedipus complex in the latency period,[[4]](#footnote-4) Freud proposes, could lead to hysteria, or in severe cases, psychosis.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the latter instance, the ego has not been able to cope with guilt associated with unconscious sexual wishes and therefore represses this guilt by splitting off part of itself into the unconscious.

Of interest to me with regard to Freud’s Oedipus complex theory is that Antonia White’s autobiographical novels lend themselves, in part, to a Freudian interpretation of sexual trauma, particularly following a typical castration/penis envy trajectory. In ‘The Autobiographical Novels of Antonia White’ (1983), Jeanne Flood suggests that this trajectory is disrupted in *The Lost Traveller* by Clara’s father’s own incestuous desires in his inability to release his daughter into another man’s arms. However, Clara’s resistances to his seductions have a way of breaking down, to the point that she fails to navigate the Oedipus complex in womanhood; as a result, she subsequently engages in unhealthy sexual relations with men whose impotence sends her back into her father’s arms. What is revealed, I propose, is an aporia in Freud’s Oedipus Complex theory because he presents contradictory initiations into the Oedipus complex. The little girl enters the Oedipus complex by way of unconscious paternal seduction and, in contrast, as a result of her natural psycho-sexual disposition.

During this stressful time, Clara begins to show signs of mental degradation that lead to full-blown psychosis in *Beyond the Glass*. It could equally be argued, however, that Clara’s psychotic episode corresponds to White’s own experiences with psychosis and may be a defence mechanism against conscious acknowledgement of having been sexually abused herself. I propose an alternative position to Freud’s theory on sexual trauma in the work of Sándor Ferenczi, who was breaking new ground in studies related to sexual trauma. Ferenczi’s important essay, ‘Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child’ (1933) returns to Freud’s ideas on sexual abuse expressed in ‘The Aetiology of Hysteria’ before Freud had renounced his seduction theory. Contrary to Freud’s theory on non-resolution of the Oedipus complex, Ferenczi argues that psychosis is a defence mechanism that is symptomatic of sexual trauma as a result of real sexual abuse. Ferenczi’s essay was written in response to Freud’s seduction theory, in which Ferenczi addresses the dissociation that can occur in adults if, as children, they were placed in a deeply traumatic situation, such as sexual abuse. He finds that adults who have mastered dissociation will quite easily slip into psychosis as a defence mechanism against conscious acknowledgement of the abuse. He warns of the psychical consequences of repeated sexual offences to the child: ‘if the shocks increase in number during the development of the child, the number and the various kinds of splits in the personality increase too, and soon it becomes extremely difficult to maintain contact without confusion of all the fragments, each of which behaves as a separate personality yet does not know of the existence of the others’ (165).

Should Ferenczi’s theory be viable, the reader may be witness to competing psychoanalytic narratives on sexual trauma in White’s history that are depicted in her autobiographical fiction.[[6]](#footnote-6) Given Ferenczi's findings and the association between childhood sexual abuse and adult psychosis, it is possible that White’s symptoms of psychosis in later life were linked to an earlier abusive experience. It has been raised in recent studies of psychosis that experiencing sexual abuse can lead to psychosis by way of a defence mechanism against acknowledgement of the abuse (Kilcommons *et al*. 602; Fisher, par. 4; Thompson *et al*. 1). That being said, whether White remembered the abuse or not is not really the point, and one has no way of knowing either way. The point is that, given White’s own investment in Freudian psychoanalytic treatment, it is not beyond the realm of possibility to suggest that a Freudian approach to sexual trauma restricts other conclusions to be drawn from a psychoanalytic perspective.

**Given that Freud’s Oedipus complex theory is aligned with his views on a child’s unconscious psycho-sexual development, White’s descent into psychosis has no bearing on reality. In other words, at the source of her madness is sexual anxiety associated with unfulfilled Oedipal desires, whereby punishment is enforced by the stronger male super-ego. For White’s protagonist, Clara,**[[7]](#footnote-7) **in *Beyond the Glass*, punishment is meted out by her father for her Oedipal desires, but it does not have the desired social outcome because her recovery from madness results in her return to her father’s arms. In an analysis of Freudian theory itself, this ending reveals incongruous aspects of Freud’s understanding of where incestuous desires originate: the parent or the child. Either way, Freud’s derogatory views of women are also evident in his perception of their desire for erotic attachments and an inability to exercise the super-ego without paternal direction.**

Nonetheless, this conclusion does raise a larger question about how one validates sexual trauma in autobiographical fiction. How much stock can readers place in White’s accounts of psychosis in her autobiographical fiction—a genre that blurs the lines between reality and fiction and between time and space—as an authentic description of any lived traumatic experience? Ultimately, I shall argue the point that White felt compelled to revisit her psychotic experience in her short story ‘The House of Clouds’ and her final completed autobiographical novel, *Beyond the Glass* to get a grasp on her own sense of identity, but it is certainly a problematic area, particularly in relation to memory, and one to which I turn my attention in Chapter Two.

**A Crisis of Self-Expression in White’s Autobiographical Fiction**

White’s engaging exploration into her madness in her autobiographical fiction is particularly intriguing to me because it is not documented at any great length in her diaries. Not only did White have the courage to make public an experience that exposed her unbalanced mind, she also attempted to document a very dark period in her history and remain true to her experience. Nonetheless, documenting psychosis is fraught with difficulties. While readers are presented with vivid snapshots of White’s experiences with madness, given the ambiguous implications of the autobiographical fiction genre, to what extent can her creative texts be perceived as true reflections of actual traumatic experiences in her history? This is a question about the nature of autobiography, in general, that occupies literary scholars and psychoanalysts alike, which I address in Chapter Two.

Given the genre in which White is writing, which blends fiction with non-fiction, questions of ambiguity will arise. Ambiguity is created by a reader’s uncertainty about those aspects of the novel that have been introduced by the author out of a desire to appeal to aesthetic values and those aspects related to complex underlying issues of authenticity that may stem from an author’s potentially confused memories or sense of identity; this is particularly true for authors like White, who suffered from mental illness. By writing her autobiographical fiction, White sought to find a balance between writing a personal testimony of her traumatic experiences and appealing to literary aesthetic values. Aesthetic values are often achieved in creative texts by the author’s use of literary devices, such as metaphor, which produces embellished descriptions that are not literally true, even if the author purports that these descriptions reflect a particular truth, as White does.

Authenticity of experience[[8]](#footnote-8) is a subject that is very common in discussions on autobiographical narratives, of which autobiographical fiction as a sub-genre is placed. For my purpose of situating White’s autobiographical fiction in context during the time in which she was writing, I primarily focus on Lejeune’s text, *On Autobiography* (1989), as he delves more deeply into the form of the autobiographical novel in a way that is closely aligned with the role of the author posed by critics during the time in which White was writing; this serves to place my analysis of White’s autobiographical fiction in historical context. However, by way of comparison, I also draw on works by, for example, James Olney, who advocates for writing about experience to trump a focus on form, and Elizabeth W. Bruss, who observes the personal and public objectives of producing autobiographical narratives, in general, against ever-shifting cultural expectations.

Lejeune draws clear parameters that define the autobiographical novel, which are based on a premise that autobiography should be depicted in a retrospective narrative prose that tells the story of one’s life, particularly the story of one’s personality. According to Lejeune, the autobiographical novel fulfils a ‘*fictional pact*’ as opposed to an ‘*autobiographical pact*’ because, either implicitly or explicitly, a clear link cannot be established by name between author, narrator and protagonist. There is, essentially, a mutual understanding between author and reader that the reader should not expect to hear the truth (Lejeune 13-15). Although Lejeune does address potential opportunities for readers’ interpretative strategies, as well as ‘new strategies of writing’ (124), due to the ambiguous nature of the autobiographical novel, Lejeune’s work is fundamentally grounded in concrete definitions that ignore abstract notions of personality, particularly in relation to ruptures in personality.

Given Lejeune’s definitions, I place his guidelines into historical perspective and address a controversy between literary scholars with regard to authorial intention and the autobiographical subject. For example, in *The Personal Heresy* (1939), humanist scholar E. M. W. Tillyard believes that readers should be aware of the subjective relationship between author and protagonist. By way of contrast, in the same text, C. S. Lewis argues in favor of there being an objective relationship between author and protagonist. This debate is continued in the work of T. S. Eliot, W. K. Wimsatt, and Monroe C. Beardsley, among others. I argue for a space to be carved for White’s autobiographical fiction to be taken seriously as creative works that aspire to both an authentic expression of a divided personality and aesthetic values. That being said, by also appealing to aesthetic values, White removes the authorial ‘I’, thus making it harder for her autobiographical fiction to be read as a testimony of her life. Fortunately, White’s diaries provide ample auxiliary support, but these only go some way to authenticating any possible trauma she experienced.

In a juxtaposition of literary and psychoanalytic writings on psychosis, I go on to discuss problems of self-expression in White’s metaphorical (poetic) descriptions of psychosis with regard to a specific traumatising event in her life, her incarceration. Again, ambiguity may arise in the reader’s attempt to make connections between the author’s account of her traumatic experience and the accuracy of that recollection, especially if the language is steeped in metaphor. From a psychoanalytical perspective, for example, in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III: The Psychoses 1955-*1956 (1993), Jacques Lacan purports that it is impossible to authenticate narratives of psychosis. In a development of Freud’s ideas on misrecognition, Lacan suggests that psychotic narratives lack a coherent transfer of metaphorical language from the unconscious to the conscious and, therefore, the experience of psychosis described in the author’s intended form will not be understood by readers. In my reading of Lacan, he is stating that psychotic narratives lack value. Using Judge Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903) to support his case, Lacan ignores Schreber’s attempts to grapple with sexual and spiritual preservation and suicidal tendencies through the agency of his alter egos; these are similarities Schreber shares with White’s alter egos, Helen and Clara.

Lacan’s ideas are typically situated in the post-structuralist movement. Post-structuralists rejected their predecessors’ focus on the literary scientific analysis of texts in an attempt to prove that, due to endless signifiers, meaning cannot be determined. In other words, each word can evoke a number of variant meanings, thus producing ambiguity.[[9]](#footnote-9) In a similar vein to Lacan’s thinking, post-structuralist literary critic Paul de Man later seeks to reduce the visual recollection of experiences to a linguistic structure. In his article, ‘Autobiography as De-facement’ (1979), de Man suggests that visual recollections captured linguistically have no value because past experiences cannot be restored just as they were. It is the same complaint he had with the Romantics. Similarly, it is also a concern that Lejeune expresses in his analysis on the relationship between author, narrator, and protagonist.

While there is certainly some merit in the arguments presented at the intersection of literary and psychoanalytic scholars, White’s testimony of her psychosis in her autobiographical fiction should be respected as a viable mode of self-expression in its raw portrayal of a fractured identity. White’s belief in her metaphorical descriptions of psychosis bearing a resemblance to objective reality would certainly be subject to scrutiny. Nonetheless, it is also important for me as an empathic reader to be willing to listen to White’s experiences as she related to them—regardless of ambiguity—as well as learning how the threat of mental, emotional, and spiritual annihilation shaped her personality and sense of being.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Alongside an examination of her diaries, White attempts to gain some kind of agency through her protagonist within the confines of a complex Oedipal narrative. **Freud’s views on female sexuality align themselves with larger socio-cultural patriarchal attitudes about women as morally inferior to their male counterparts, which is particularly evident in some orthodox religions in the first half of the twentieth century, for example, Catholicism.**[[11]](#footnote-11) **As a one-time lapsed Catholic herself, White would have felt this attitude most poignantly. Spiritual angst was a strong motif in *Beyond the Glass,* and yet this motif comes through most strongly in her first autobiographical novel, *Frost in* May. It is a narrative that, in many ways, encompasses the full weight of White’s troubled (pre)Oedipal relationships with her parents, with Catholicism, and with how she perceives herself as a sexual woman ‒ to which** I turn my attention in Chapter Three.

**Socio-Cultural Notions of Female Sexuality**

In Chapter Three, a central question is posed: how can readers navigate an autobiographical novel like *Frost in May* that seems to paradoxically testify to and against the suppression of female sexuality? As shown in the previous chapter, White was not just a woman compelled to document her troubled relationships and traumatic experiences. She was also a writer who was well aware of the need to write according to literary aesthetic values. Developing literary trends on the relationship between author, narrator, and protagonist or author and reader in the twentieth century is part of a larger literary discussion on how literature best represents the social milieu. The modernist movement, for example, created a rupture in the socio-cultural framework by asserting the body in literature through transgressive modes of sexual expression in defiance of oppressive patriarchal authorities. This movement had a profound influence on White. However, she found herself torn between being an aspiring modernist artist and a devout Catholic in the 1930s, a time when to be both seemed incompatible. On the one hand, White aspires toward a literary modernist mindset advocating for female sexual liberation as a war waged on suppressed sexuality in a dominant Catholic culture. On the other hand, as a lapsed Catholic, she desperately wanted to be received back into the arms of the church. As a result of this dilemma, White’s sense of self-as-artist is lurched into creative and psychological conflict.

In *Frost in May*, White depicts a young and romantic convert called Nanda Grey who resides and is educated at Lippington Convent between the ages of nine and fourteen. During her time at Lippington, Nanda tries to behave in a way a good Catholic should, but she feels subjected to a series of seemingly hypocritical rules and futile punishments from both the nuns at the convent and her father, Mr. Grey. However, her protagonist’s creation of a salacious novel, which mirrors White’s own experiences at the Convent of the Sacred Heart where White’s own partially completed novel is perceived by the nuns and, unforgivably so, by her father as an act of spiritual treachery against the Catholic Church, results in her dismissal from the convent. In analogous terms, **Nanda’s perception of her sexuality in *Frost in May* as being inherently corrupt draws an interesting parallel with religio-cultural portrayals of women that stem from woman’s first transgression that led to Adam’s seduction and the fall of man.**

This conflict is exacerbated by a complex underlying (pre)Oedipal narrative. On the one hand, a Freudian Oedipus complex is present, but it is enmeshed with prevailing pre-Oedipal identification problems unveiled in motifs of food and maternity. These pre-Oedipal problems stem from Nanda’s ambivalent feelings for her mother that, in Freudian terms, demonstrate the strongest symptoms of sexual trauma. According to Freud, sexual difficulties may arise when, for example, the female caregiver unwittingly arouses the young child sexually when taking care of his or her hygienic needs and when breastfeeding. Freud suggests that women are the root cause of a child’s difficult sexual maturation as a result of real sexual arousal, albeit unconsciously initiated. In ‘Femininity’ (1933), Freud recalls that early period in his study of infantile sexual traumas that caused him ‘many distressing hours’. He believed that the phantasy of sexual seduction in the Oedipus complex proper could be found in the girl’s pre-Oedipal history in part due to her mother arousing ‘pleasurable sensations in her genitals’ (149-150). Furthermore, Freud places much emphasis on the necessary antagonistic role of the breast as a contributing factor to a child’s sexual trauma and developing anxiety, which also places the mother as the source of sexual arousal in the child in the auto-erotic phase of her psycho-sexual development.

With regard to spiritual betrayal, writing autobiographically White portrays her father, Cecil Botting, as a man who fostered his daughter’s fears of damnation because of guilt in relation to his own corrupt sexuality and fears of damnation, which is projected onto White’s protagonist. This projection, which is supported in Freud’s Oedipus complex with its focus on childhood sexuality, exacerbates White’s construction of her self-as-artist as a woman suffering from spiritual angst and mental illness.

Whilst the discovery of her novel is a traumatic event for White, I propose that it is no accident that it remains unfinished in *Frost in May* because it reflects White’s own assertion of the right to express herself sexually and autonomously in her writing in a culture in which sexual expression is suppressed. Nanda’s relationship with her father and the nuns at Lippington—authoritative figures who symbolically manufacture Nanda according to a higher moral imperative—illustrate parallels between key Catholic tenets on sexuality and Freud’s Oedipus complex theory. This parallel exposes a complex relationship between psychoanalytic and religio-cultural notions of regulation, sacrifice, and punishment that have been internalised by White and projected into Nanda. Although the novel is unfinished and Nanda had planned to convert her characters into faithful, law-abiding subjects under God’s jurisdiction, it is discovered prior to this momentous event. Nanda is subsequently punished and cast out of her Garden of Eden. This punishment lays the groundwork for her to learn from her transgression and transform her desire according to a higher moral imperative as a woman who proceeds to her socio-religious conforming role in subservience to male authority. An interesting parallel is also drawn with Freud’s construction of the Oedipus complex as an incest barrier in a larger religio-cultural context to tame female sexuality.

This conclusion has wider implications in terms of White’s construction of her self-as-artist in larger socio-cultural terms that also raises issues in relation to the suppression of the voices of victims of sexual abuse. Freud’s Oedipus complex goes through a series of modifications pertaining to his views on penis envy and a woman’s moral fortitude. A fundamental premise that underscores Freud’s Oedipus complex is that it aligns itself with larger socio-cultural ideals about moral sexual human conduct. As early as in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud asserts that ‘Respect for this barrier is essentially a cultural demand made by society. Society must defend itself against the danger that the interests which it needs for the establishment of higher social units may be swallowed up by the family’ (128). In other words, passage through the Oedipus complex is essential ‘for the progress of civilization’ (128).

White’s bold assertion of female sexuality is inscribed within a socio-cultural framework that functions within the parameters of both Catholic and psychoanalytic patriarchal discourses through mechanisms of condemnation and confession. I propose that there is a parallel between the Oedipus complex as a vehicle for the transformation of desire and the natures of condemnation and confession in patriarchal religio-cultural terms towards the same aim. Women confess their own perverse sexual phantasies, at the root of which is maternal seduction, in order to then learn valuable moral lessons from them in the hands of a larger patriarchal authority.

**Contemporary Trends on Sexual Trauma, Memory, and Betrayal**

Whilst it is not my aim in this thesis to prove that father-daughter incest occurred in White’s history, debates today largely revolve around why it is that aim cannot be achieved. At the core of Freud’s renouncement of his seduction theory was non-belief in his patients’ claims of sexual abuse that he largely attributed to sexual phantasies. With regard to women, in particular, his view reflected the lower value he placed on women compared to their male counterparts biologically, socially, and morally. In contrast, Ferenczi believed his patients’ claims. In White’s case, her own descent into psychosis against a backdrop of a complicated and highly charged psycho-sexual relationship with her father may actually serve to evidence father-daughter incest but it cannot be proven. What came out of this initial investigation into sexual trauma, however, is how differently sexual trauma is interpreted in psychoanalytic theory. These differences of interpretation lay a foundation upon which many contemporary theories on sexual trauma rest; in many ways, these theories speak to either Freud’s or Ferenczi’s original claims.

Freud’s views on sexual trauma generated a variety of paradigmatic approaches to interpretation. There has been, for instance, a lot of scientific mainstream psychology and psychiatric research alongside feminist trauma studies into the damaging effects of childhood sexual abuse. Perhaps more forcefully, feminists came on the scene in the 1980s with examples of recovered memory cases in therapy and exposed the detrimental impact Freud’s Oedipus complex theory had on perpetuating gender inequality that they argued was based on society’s patriarchal need to ensure women’s subjugation to their male counterparts. Leading figures in the feminist movement are Judith Lewis Herman and Florence Rush. Herman, for example, paved the way in her book, *Father-Daughter Incest*, (1981) for father-daughter incest to be understood not as ‘an aberration but rather a common and predictable abuse of patriarchal power’ (219). In other words, women’s bodies became the method of subjugation that led to their adopting an incestuous way of life in how they perceived their roles in society: to marry men just like their fathers who would tower over them in wealth, stature, and authority. While Feminists took a somewhat aggressive political approach against men, which at times seemed to target all men, they did advocate for voices of victims of sexual abuse; feminists placed a spotlight on father-daughter incest and the need for victims’ voices to be heard after spending many years unable to talk about the experiences or as a result of ‘repressed’ memories that haunt victims symptomatically, for example, through psychosis, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD),[[12]](#footnote-12) extreme anxiety, and an inability to develop trusting relations with others. Aggressively giving victims of father-daughter incest voices, feminists’ claims led to a new market of autobiographical novels and memoirs that cast the authors in the dual roles of victim and survivor as they navigate the emotional quagmire in which incest has placed them.

Cathy Caruth is perhaps one of the most cited trauma theorists on memory in literary studies. She shifts focus away from the speculative area of sexual abuse validation to what extent memory survives any traumatic event and is then later narrated in an attempt to speak the ‘unspeakable’. As her theoretical model, Caruth primarily juxtaposes psychoanalysts’ writings, namely Freud, Lacan, and Onno van der Hart, with literary and political theorists. My interest, in particular, is in Caruth’s use of Freud’s work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), to support her claims in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). She utilises Freud’s ideas on repetition-compulsion as scaffolding to support her argument that, for example, traumatic flashbacks function as haunting voices that cry out from a second wounding, which serve to defy and bear witness to the original trauma. It is a situation Caruth also posits in the therapeutic transference situation.

In my interpretation of Freud’s theory of repetition-compulsion, which is driven by instinctual sexual impulses as demonstrated in his *fort-da* game example, I revisit *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to illustrate how both White’s protagonist and readers serve to defy and bear witness to White’s original traumatic event, which is maternal betrayal as a result of neglect. White felt deeply betrayed by her mother because she enabled her husband to control White’s sense of identity so completely as a daughter and as a woman that it led to White’s inability to create truly loving and trusting relationships with other people in her life, namely her daughters.

Given this particular scenario, many episodes of White’s hostile treatment of her mother in her autobiographical fiction that resemble pre-Oedipal difficulties go beyond these Freudian premises. Writing for White in some ways becomes an act of revenge due to deeply rooted feelings of betrayal that go beyond Freudian (pre)Oedipal premises, but also a means to work through these feelings. It is in White’s autobiographical fiction where White airs her hostility towards her mother because, in contrast to diary references to her father that showcase the complexity of their relationship, mention of her mother is scant. This further illustrates the depths to which White’s feelings of betrayal go; it is only in a detached manner, writing in the third person in autobiographical fiction, where White can confront her mother’s failings, and in so doing, paradoxically, create a new connection with her.

Chapter One

Freud’s Oedipus Complex and Conflicting Psychoanalytic Theories of

Sexual Trauma in Relation to Antonia White’s Autobiographical Novels

*Non-Resolution of Oedipus Complex in Antonia White’s Autobiographical Novels – Conflicting Psychoanalytic Theories of Sexual Trauma and Psychosis*

When Sigmund Freud renounced his seduction theory in favor of the Oedipus complex, it was because he felt he could no longer sustain belief in his patients’ claims that they had been victims of sexual abuse. He argued against these claims on two grounds: 1) that there were just too many cases for them to be true; and 2) that the cases—namely those in which the father was accused of being the sexual perpetrator—were based on fantasies as part of a child’s natural psycho-sexual development. Knowing what we know today about the prevalence of sexual abuse, it may appear odd to hear that, in Freud’s time, the higher the number of cases, the less likely they are true. However, in the first half of the twentieth century, Freud’s incredulity may be understandable, in a way, as was his decision to view his patients’ cases as a more universally applicable unconscious desire. This new development stemmed from his patriarchal stance, a pervasive one among his medical colleagues and society in general at that time, that females are biologically inferior to males. It was a view that he carried into his perception of emotional and ethical female behaviours and the unconscious motivations behind them. This stance set the stage for Freud’s modified position on sexual abuse, which is demonstrated in the Oedipus complex, a theory that goes through a series of modifications in line with his developing views on women. This chapter addresses the lasting damaging impact of Freud’s Oedipus complex theory on victims of sexual abuse: in particular, the limitations attached to validating women’s experiences of sexual abuse in a Freudian theoretical climate in the first half of the twentieth century.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section will examine the complexities of Freud’s Oedipus complex theory in relation to an examination of the autobiographical novels of Antonia White, a novelist who may have been a victim of sexual abuse. The second section will set out conflicting psychoanalytic theories of sexual trauma in relation to psychosis. New insights into the relationship between psychosis and sexual trauma may open up avenues into investigating possible incidences of sexual abuse in patients’ histories. These new insights, in turn, may serve to explain White’s deep-rooted psychological angst that is projected into her autobiographical fiction.

The evidence I provide in opposition to Freud’s position does not suggest that at the source of every psychotic patient’s distress is sexual abuse, and this is certainly not my aim. Given these conflicting theories of sexual trauma, my aim is to illustrate that, due to the popularity of Freud’s Oedipus complex theory, severe psychic restrictions were placed on victims of sexual abuse in psychoanalytic treatment during the first half of the twentieth century. Sándor Ferenczi’s position on sexual trauma, for example, does not stand up to scrutiny beside dominant Freudian ideology because possible victims of sexual abuse undergoing Freudian psychoanalytic treatment may have reinvented their memories against the backdrop of a suggested unresolved Oedipal trajectory. White also underwent Freudian psychoanalytic treatment, in part due to her sexual preoccupation with her father, which is why White’s autobiographical fiction follows the same path.

***Non-Resolution of Oedipus Complex in Antonia White’s Autobiographical Novels***

Since Freud's inception of the Oedipus complex, it has gone through some modifications, including an assertion that a female is not only biologically inferior to her male counterpart, but socially, ethically and emotionally inferior, too. A stable feature, though, is that the little girl assumes that she once possessed a penis that her mother then took away. In other words, the little girl believes she has been physically castrated. Freud does not divulge what the little girl thinks the mother has done with the newly removed penis, but if the little girl did have one, its removal would be psychologically damaging and relations between mother and daughter equally damaged. This psychic trauma occurs in what Freud has coined the pre-Oedipal phase, which lays the foundation for the turbulent processes of identification, attachment, and ego development.

The little girl's unconscious objective is to enter the Oedipus complex proper and reclaim the penis. She eagerly redirects her attention away from her mother and towards her father in the hope that he will give her the penis she desires. The little girl identifies with her mother as a rival for the penis but needs to come to terms with the fact that her mother has also been castrated.

Freud’s castration complex idea is developed more fully in *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (1940).At the onset of the Oedipus complex, the little girl sees that the little boy has a penis and assumes that she has already been castrated, but she is now resentful about this and seeks some kind of compensation for her loss:

The daughter, under the influence of her envy for the penis, cannot forgive her mother for having sent her into the world so insufficiently equipped. In her resentment over this she gives up her mother and puts someone else in her place as the object of her love—her father. If one has lost a love-object, the most obvious reaction is to identify oneself with it, to replace it from within, as it were, by identification.... Identification with her mother can take the place of attachment to her mother. (62)

In this tangled web of desire and revenge, a problematic Oedipal narrative pervades White’s autobiographical novels, which I shall proceed to illustrate against the backdrop of her personal writings.

White’s relationship with her parents displays ambivalent tendencies that form an interesting parallel with Freud’s Oedipus complex theory. For example, White frequently draws her mother Christine as a flaky character in her personal writings and autobiographical novels. White’s disdain for and feeling of superiority over her mother are evident, and she makes it clear that she is more highly regarded in her father’s eyes than her mother. In *As Once in May*, White recollects that

The prouder I grew of my father, who could not have been a more presentable parent, the more embarrassing I found her refusal to look or behave like other people’s mothers. Even as a small child I was critical of her and realised that many other women, besides my grandmother, were critical of her too. All these women who adored my father thought that my mother was unworthy of him and pitied him for having married a capricious, affected, extravagant woman with no sense of wifely duty. (259)

How White is able to fathom such criticism with keen observation at her young age is puzzling. What seems probable is that White is using this description as an opportunity to air how she felt about her mother for much of her life. There is a tinge of bitterness that comes through in this description, as White replaces her feelings of loss with descriptions that suggest she is in control of her mother’s presence in her life.

White’s father was a central figure in her life, and her mother was often either absent or in the way. White recalls a memory in her childhood when her mother brought back a plush black poodle from a trip to Paris that White named Mister Dash. In her delight, White recalls that she was ‘too overwhelmed’ to thank her mother as she was more preoccupied with kissing her new stuffed animal. Her mother asked, ‘“Aren’t you going to kiss Mummy too? Haven’t you missed her all these weeks she’s been away?” I had not even noticed her absence, but I gave her a kiss of passionate gratitude. At that moment I truly loved her. But not as much as the black poodle’ (232).

Similarly, when Nanda’s parents come to visit Lippington, Mrs. Grey is an embarrassment due to her ignorance of the necessary decorum at the convent; she ruins what was supposed to be a perfect curtsey by Nanda and laments the loss of Nanda’s beautiful hairdo: ‘Nanda felt herself turn scarlet…. She had been long enough at Lippington to know that personal vanity was the most contemptible of all sins’ (38). In contrast, upon Mr. Grey complimenting Nanda on her curtsey, she notices him give her ‘his rather rare smile and Nanda began to thaw into a human being. She was very fond of her father’ (39).

There is a strong Oedipal component overtly expressed in White’s first autobiographical novel, *Frost in May*. During Nanda’s stay with her father during the Christmas holidays prior to beginning her fifth Lent term at Lippington, the following scenario is presented to the reader:

During these three weeks, Nanda and her father lived in a state of blissful companionship. Mrs. Grey was away at Bournemouth recovering from one of her mysterious indispositions…. To her great delight, her father had begun to treat her as a grown-up person. He dressed for dinner in her honour, asked her permission before he lit his pipe, and bought her pink carnations on the great gala nights when they dined out at a restaurant. (172-173)

In the absence of her mother, Nanda has her father all to herself. In a scene of potential romance, ‘Mr. Grey remarks, “Once upon a time I used to wish I had a son. But a daughter’s a much better thing to have.” He did not look at Nanda, but she saw that his hands were shaking so that it took even more matches than usual to get the pipe going again’ (177). Following this declaration of affection, ‘Mr. Grey holds [Nanda] for longer than usual as she kissed him good night, smoothing back her hair from her forehead, and looking into her eyes’ (179). This Oedipal scene is short-lived, with bitter disappointment on Mr. Grey’s side and a deeper sense of rejection on Nanda’s as a result of her writing a romantic novel that is discovered and frowned upon by the nuns. Nanda includes a scene in which her heroine receives a kiss of ‘burning passion’ for which Nanda is severely reprimanded by her father (202). The novel, which describes the heroine’s flirtations with admirers, marks a particularly traumatic moment in White’s life because the experience mirrors her own: it was the ‘childhood shock which paralyzed me emotionally’ (qtd. in Strauss-Noll 133).

From a Freudian perspective, the following explanation may be given. In ‘The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex’ (1924), Freud writes,

[The Oedipus complex] succumbs to repression … and is followed by the latency period. It has not yet become clear, however, what it is that brings about its destruction. Analyses seem to show that it is the experience of painful disappointments. The little girl likes to regard herself as what her father loves above all else; but the time comes when she has to endure a harsh punishment from him and she is cast out of her fool’s paradise. (173)

In other words, upon a young woman becoming aware of her sexuality upon the onset of puberty, her sexual desires are strengthened. While Freud is not sure how these sexual desires are quashed, he suspects that it may have something to do with the father essentially enforcing the incest barrier. However, after Nanda is cast out of her paradise, her sexual obsession with her father increases in subsequent autobiographical novels accompanied by the continuous desire to seek his approval.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Critics have interpreted White’s writing of her own novel at the convent as a pivotal moment that sparked writer’s block. In her essay, ‘Antonia White and the Subversion of Literary Impotence at Hayford Hall’ (2005), as a result of equating writing with sin, Sandra Jeffery observes that ‘Susan Kolodny, [in her analysis of] writer’s block, suggests that certain content may be resisted because of an association with traumatic experiences. An attempt to commit a creative work to paper triggers a repressed memory that is met with a defence mechanism in the form of resistance, which in White’s case was her writer’s block’ (Jeffery 82).

Utilising Kleinian theory, Jeffery turns to the dialogue between Kolodny and Maria Bergmann to illustrate how ‘the aggressive feelings we originally had toward important others, but felt we had to protect them from in order to preserve our relationship to them, may “get displaced or projected … leading to work paralysis or destruction of the product”’ (82). Jeffery concludes that White, under pressure not to defile her father’s good name, which would necessarily be exposed in her writing, leads her to writer’s block (82). These sentiments echo Jeanne Flood’s observation in her essay, ‘The Autobiographical Novels of Antonia White’ (1983): ‘Nanda in a work of the imagination has revealed herself to [Mr. Grey] as corrupted by sexuality’ (Flood 135). Similarly, in her article ‘Antonia White: Portrait of the Artist as a Dutiful Daughter’ (1991), Ellen Cronan Rose makes a striking connection between a scribbling incident, her writing a lewd novel, and how her father reacted by spanking her. In response to Nanda’s reaction to the novel, ‘If he had stripped her naked and beaten her, she would not have felt more utterly humiliated’ (White 217), Cronan Rose observes that both writing and writer’s block are connected with ‘defiance, compounded by incestuous desire and Oedipal seduction’ (247). As if in response to these observations, in her essay, ‘Site Also of Angst and Spiritual Search’ (2005), Sandra Chait claims that White’s ‘sexuality offended [her father], and he attempted to control her every action, her every thought, even to the point of causing her mental breakdown under the stress to express herself honestly, and therefore sexually too, in writing’ (156).

It is certainly true that writing that fateful novel at the Convent of the Sacred Heart and her father’s reaction to it scarred White, which would explain why she did not write other than in the private domain of her diaries for nearly twenty years. When she returns to writing, she is haunted by her father in such a potent way that her experience with writing is associated with one of the most private acts. In an *Analysis diary* entry dated 1 June 1936, just three years after *Frost in May* is published and another 15-month stint in psychoanalytic treatment, White writes,

Am no longer interested in face cream … almost indifferent to clothes. Have become greedy again…. Hate my fat; do nothing about it. Hate wholesome food … Carroll says … That I will not write a masterpiece because other people would ‘devour’ it…. I am just as anxious and embarrassed when anyone asks ‘are you writing anything now? As when my mother or anyone in authority asked if I had been to the lavatory. (75)

Later, in an *Analysis diary* entry dated 27 April, 1938, gripped with writer’s block, she associates her writing more closely with the act of defecation: ‘The act of defaecation is important, pleasurable and highly satisfying to me. I can admit this to Carroll without any shame. Now, if I really think of my work as faeces, why does the act of writing cause me such distress and misery? Obviously if I really thought writing was shitting, I should be ashamed to admit I enjoyed it, even to myself (129-130). Feelings of guilt, I add, are carried into *Beyond the Glass* at the solicitor’s office to take care of the marriage annulment with Archie. Mr. Ramsden comments on her having ‘some literary ability’ to which Clara replies ‘Whoever told you that nonsense?’ later apologising because ‘I always seem to be rude when people mention writing. Guilt, I suppose’ (75). For White, the act of writing is fused with deeply embedded psychological issues made manifest in her love object relations, which are symbolised in progressive acts of consumption, devouring, and defecation that are reinforced in psychoanalytic treatment and which contribute to her psychological angst.

White’s writing is, essentially, an act of sadomasochism, as her feelings about it demonstrate. She associates her writing with defecation that is both a good and bad thing. She also makes a comparison between her writing and delivering a male child. The act of defecation, it seems, is a form of birth. On the one hand, writing autobiographically, White’s power stems from her father’s desire for a son, which is so strong that he tries to fashion White into that son rather than as an act of gender equality. Perhaps caught in a net of Oedipal desire that is displaced onto her creation of *Frost in May*, White attempts to navigate away from her femininity, which she believes is at the core of her sexual transgression. In a diary entry dated 25 June, 1938, White confesses that in some way, ‘I suppose I want a book in some funny way to be a male child, something powerful, able to fertilise other people. I can understand the extraordinary satisfaction of producing a son. A woman has not a penis but she can produce a being with a real penis’ (139). Of course, this terminology is further evidence of the great impact that Freudian psychoanalytic treatment had on White.

When White returns to writing, it is with gusto, with three consecutive autobiographical novels that are extensively critical of her mother and obsessed with her father. Many episodes in these autobiographical novels revolve around Oedipal conflicts between Nanda (to become Clara in the next novel, *The Lost Traveller*) and her father, Mr. Grey (to become Claude Batchelor). A central feature of these subsequent novels is Clara’s complex sexual relationships with other men that she unconsciously allows her father to frustrate, but which also lead to psychotic episodes. In these circumstances, Freud’s notion of the Oedipus complex as stemming solely from a child’s incestuous desires becomes unstable.

Out of all the autobiographical novels, *The Lost Traveller* perhaps displays the most intense Oedipal relations between Clara and her father Claude Batchelor. As a tidy follow-up to *Frost in May*, Claude’s authoritarianism continues, and his wife Isabel is marginalised and treated with polite contempt. Isabel Batchelor is introduced in a way that describes her like one of the decorations in the house Clara and her family lived in on 18 Valetta Road, West Kensington: ‘If the blinds of Number 18 had not been drawn, its curtains would have appeared perfectly correct except for those of the top floor bedroom. These were of pink satin and people who disapproved of Claude Batchelor’s wife saw in them one more proof of her extravagance and oddness’ (3). This sense of vanity annoys Nanda, but it is something that perhaps struck a chord with White. Christine was known to be vain; for example, she would take the housekeeping money or from her daughter’s allowance to buy herself something pretty (Dunn 10).

Claude is tolerant of his wife, and his attraction to her is like one would find in the pink satin curtains: ‘From his boyhood to this day his natural preference had always been for golden-haired women; plump, good-tempered and insipidly pretty. Yet the moment he had set eyes, twenty years ago, on a sallow, brown-haired girl whose beauty was only one degree removed from ugliness he had been fascinated, and fascinated he remained’ (White 5). This description is very revealing. In just two sentences, White tells the reader that her father prefers women who look like Clara and that her mother’s beauty pales in comparison. At the beginning of the novel, given Claude’s view of his wife, a woman for whom he feels ‘resentful tenderness’, White has set the stage for there being no competition for Claude’s affection (5).

Clara’s father, however, is known for his insensitive nature, and this becomes painfully apparent in the early part of the narrative after his father’s funeral at Paget’s Fold. Whilst defending her father against cousin Horace’s playful and yet subtly jeering remarks in reference to teaching, Clara finds herself in an embarrassing situation at the dinner table: ‘Suddenly Clara lost all control of herself. “You’re always sneering at my father,” she burst out, her cheeks flaming’ (70). Unfortunately, Clara’s father does not take too kindly to a young woman defending him and chastises her, demanding she apologise. Clara refuses and leaves the room to lick her wounds in the orchard. Clara thinks about how she would never have stood up for her mother: ‘The scene in the churchyard came back to her. She thought jealousy, “I love him much more than she does”’ (71).

It is also at Paget's Fold where Clara and her father enter into a fight after he observes her first kiss with her cousin Blaze Hoadley. When Blaze leaves, her father appears in a rage that seems to choke him: ‘His face was distorted; his eyes narrowed as if the flesh round them was swelling and silting them up’ (77). Clara tries to exonerate Blaze by defending his innocence, but this attempt backfires on her. She finds that her actions confirm her father's poor perception of her: ‘“Ah,” he gloated. “There at least we have the truth. A young man doesn't ... unless he is a scoundrel ... if the girl doesn't lead him on. I've no right to blame Blaze Hoadley. You were fair game.... I thought you were an innocent child. Do you expect me to be pleased to find you are nothing of the kind?”’ (77).

In ‘The Autobiographical Novels of Antonia White’ (1986), Jeanne Flood suggests that ‘Claude's anger is motivated by his own forbidden desire. His demand that Clara be innocent expresses a deep demand that she belong sexually to him’ (137). This is certainly a complex situation that reveals an aporia[[14]](#footnote-14) in a reading of Freud’s early development of his Oedipus complex theory: Freud suggests that a little girl’s unconscious incestuous desires are unconsciously initiated by her father but curbed by his super-ego; this idea is in contrast to evidence that the father’s role is to enforce the incest barrier in light of his daughter’s unconscious sexual desires for him that he does not initiate.

Freud suggests that it is natural for a father to gravitate towards his daughter, which he illustrates in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) in the context of his observations of childhood sexuality. Freud makes two observations about childhood sexuality: that it exists much earlier than society supposes and that unconscious processes of rivalry and possession activate moral conditioning. Freud’s rationale for his latter observation, in particular, first combats a societal view based on history’s cycle of the despotic father who ‘frantically holds on to whatever of the sadly antiquated *potestas patris* still remains in the society of to-day’ and the daughter’s desire for sexual freedom that the mother notices at a time when she must renounce her own sexual desires (253). At a time when parents also show their own partiality for ‘sexual selection’, i.e., when fathers gravitate towards and indulge their daughters and mothers do the same towards their sons, a child’s sense of competition for the opposite-sexed parent strengthens (253). A case in point that Freud uses is a three-year-old girl who proclaims, ‘Now mother can go away; then father must marry me and I shall be his wife’ (253).

In the Paget’s Fold scene between Clara and her father, there is also a hint of uncertainty in Claude’s voice that reflects Freud's act of prohibition of incestuous desire. Freud does not deny that a child’s incestuous feelings may be triggered by her father’s sexual preference, but it is Claude's guilt, or super-ego, that prevents him from acting upon his desire. In his reference to primitive men in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) Freud comments that‘in their unconscious there is nothing they would like more than to violate [the taboo of incest], but they are [consciously] afraid to do so; they are afraid precisely because they would like to, and the fear is stronger than the desire’ (41). It is a viewpoint that extends into his analysis of modern man.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Flood is partially correct in her statement about Claude. It seems that Freud’s super-ego comes to the rescue, unlike Clara’s super-ego, evidenced in her emotional conflict. On a line between appropriate and inappropriate sexual verbiage, Freud’s view on father-daughter incest prohibition becomes, for Clara, a test of courage that is poignantly shown in her relationship with her father. When Claude bellows at Clara after Blaze Hoadley leaves the scene, Clara is humiliated by her father's harsh verbal attack, and yet something within her feels a strange sense of triumph: ‘Had he beaten her, the original Clara could not have felt more humiliated. But someone else ... was it the girl in the glass? ... had the strangest sense of triumph’ (White 78). In ‘Loving Subjects: Narratives of Female Desire’ (2002), Doreen D'Cruz finds, in a similar vein to Flood, that, in a situation like this, what one witnesses is ‘the daughter's resistance to paternal seduction’ (13). A mirror motif emerges in defiance of the Oedipal situation in which Clara finds herself, but it is unfamiliar to her. Although this may be true, it is true only up to a point because Clara's guilt is that she does in fact respond to her father's forbidden incestuous desires by way of seeking approval.

When Clara does resist Claude’s paternal seduction, her resistance has a tendency to break down. Only a short while after the Blaze Hoadley scene, Claude takes Clara out to the opera, and then to a restaurant. It is at the restaurant where a highly suggestive conversation takes place between Clara and her father:

‘I can't believe that you were anything but good ever,’ she said sincerely.

‘Can't you, my dear? Perhaps it's a fortunate illusion.’ He seemed about to say something more then stopped. Instead he looked at her intently for a moment and then sighed: ‘Ah, Clara.’

‘What is it, Daddy?’

‘Nothing. I was toying with a wild notion I sometimes have.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Well, now and then, I try to fancy how it would be if you and I were not father and daughter.’

She took it up eagerly.

‘Oh, I've often thought that too.’

His eyes grew bright.

‘Have you? That's remarkably interesting.’

‘Of course I don't mean I want anyone else for a father. But just that now and then ...’

‘We could forget,’ he nodded. ‘Exactly. Sometimes the idea is so vivid to me that it is almostlike a memory. We meet, you and I, in a lonely tower. I don't know why a tower. And by some spell, we have forgotten our identities.’ (113)

This scene is indeed suggestive of Clara having an Oedipal desire for her father; it is a desire, moreover, that acquiesces to Freud's view of a father’s sexual desires in relation to the incest taboo, which accentuates the aporia. Clara's words, then, reinforce problematic Oedipal notions in her identification with a role that her mother should fulfill. Going to the opera and a restaurant, for example, is a pastime that usually a husband and wife would do together. At a critical point in the conversation, Clara is about to elaborate upon what I infer to be a relationship between herself and her father that is sexual in nature, but she does not finish her sentence. Here, Clara’s and her father’s identities are fused as they engage in what seems to be a telepathic exchange. The fact that Clara is unable to finish her sentence is suggestive of Claude's recognition of Clara's Oedipal motivation and weak super-ego. At this climactic moment, the reader is locked out of the conversation, which now borders on sexual impropriety. Should, for example, a kiss have been exchanged, it is a moment that would probably leave the reader at a loss as to how to interpret it from a Freudian perspective, other than White acting out her own Oedipal wishes through an alter ego. This moment eerily echoes Nanda’s heroine’s flirtations with an admirer in her previous autobiographical novel, *Frost in May*, in which she experiences a kiss of ‘burning passion’ for which she is severely reprimanded by her father (202).

What is particularly striking to me is how the scene in the restaurant draws an interesting parallel with White’s personal descriptions of time spent with her father. White would treasure those moments when her mother was excluded from the party of two, a time when she would have her father all to herself. In *As Once in May*, White reflects on the little excursions her father and she would take, particularly when it was to share cream trifles in sworn secrecy:

It was a great joy to discover that he reveled in cream cakes as much as I did. How human, how approachable, how utterly charming he was, devouring Appenrodts’ superb confections, with his blue eyes shining, his cheeks very pink and little flecks of cream dotting his moustache! I felt I had never loved him so much…. ‘I daren’t indulge in it in front of your mother,’ he confided in me. ‘She tells me I’m getting too fat as it is. You won’t give me away when we get home, will you, Eirene?’ I shook my head ecstatically. That was my crowning bliss, the thought that he and I were sharing something highly pleasurable from which my mother was excluded. (275)

These excursions were few and far between. As a child, White would often pretend that she had a cupboard inside her body where she would store up as much loving attention as she could from her father. From a Freudian perspective, however, White may have been taking revenge on her mother—her original love object—for denying her the penis; thus, she uses her father as a tool to provoke her mother's jealousy.

It was only after her mother's death that White apprehended a more stalwart and devoted side to her mother's character and the complex nature of the Oedipal relationship in her family unit. In a diary entry dated 1 March, 1939, White describes her father’s treatment of the women in his life in a way that is either true or reveals her own wishful thinking: ‘He treated his wife like a child, his daughter like a wife’ (162). In relation to an aporia being revealed in Freud’s Oedipus complex, there seems to be a snag for which Freud may have an answer: It is difficult to ascertain if White’s comment here is true or if it further supports her Oedipal fantasy of identifying with her mother in a desire to take her place as her father’s wife. It is a problem, moreover, in terms of validating the possibility that White was a victim of father-daughter incest.

As a lead-in to the possibility that White was a victim of sexual abuse, I would like to first provide some background on her parents’ relationship because it may offer some indication as to her father’s sexual needs. The relationship between White's parents was fraught with sexual difficulties and disillusionment. As a child, Christine Botting was neglected by her parents. As an adult, she was very childlike, daunted by what the future held for her as a woman and ill-equipped for life as a mother. Tragically, Christine suffered through agonising labor only to give birth to stillborn babies, all of them girls (Dunn 19). She once commented to White that in labor, which White mentions in *The Lost Traveller*, ‘you go down to the gates of hell’ (101).[[16]](#footnote-16) Christine was traumatised by pregnancy and labor and subsequently showed little maternal fondness towards her daughter, which included the decision not to breastfeed her.

Christine's sexual relationship with Cecil was also far from fruitful. According to White's biographer, Jane Dunn, Cecil would often come home drunk and force himself upon his wife. Many more pregnancies after White's birth resulted from episodes of submission as Christine would constantly yield to Cecil's demands that she provide him with the son that White, herself, should have been (Dunn 17-18). No siblings arrived.

Perhaps as a result of her mother’s inability to produce a male child, White's relationship with her mother became onerous. Christine's inability to produce a sibling for White produced contempt. White was desperate for a little brother, knowing that it was one of her father’s deepest wishes. She began to resent her mother and turn towards her father, perhaps in hopes of giving him a ‘penis child’. Later, White would make an important revelation that was to define her innermost turmoil. She recognised that her family's dynamics were dysfunctional due to the fact that they never seemed to be united as a family of three. In a diary entry dated 5 June, 1938, White observes how there was always one person left out in ‘a conspiracy of twos’ (135). This situation is a driving force in the autobiographical novels and a situation in which White herself was all too familiar.

Although White coveted her father’s attention, he was capable of extreme cruelty towards her. He was a harsh disciplinarian who would beat her into obedience, which reinforced his role as master of the house. There is one occasion that is particularly disturbing: White recollects an incident when she was just four years old. She purposefully scribbled on the walls in her father's study and then blatantly lied about it, even though she was aware that her father knew the truth. As punishment, her father made her bend over between a spare desk and a bookcase with a ruler in his hand: ‘Turn round, and bend over that desk. I'm going to take down your knickers and beat you with it’ (245) According to White's account in *As Once in May*, although her father looked very angry, she noticed ‘he was wearing a curious one-sided smile’ (245). White does not recollect entirely what happened that day; nonetheless, she exonerated her father from this crime.

The spanking incident has fueled debate over whether White was sexually abused by her father. In *Daily Modernism* (2000), Elizabeth Podnieks suggests that ‘White [was] probably [a] victim of incest’ (93). In a similar vein in ‘My Art Belongs to Daddy’, Mary Lynn Broe suggests that fictional events, such as Claude’s seduction of Clara’s friend, Patsy, in *The Lost Traveller* serve to ‘*explain things in daddy*’ (qtd. in Broe 44; Broe’s emphasis). Neither Broe nor White develop upon this statement, but it is worth investigating the scene between Claude and Patsy to hear what needs to be explained.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Shortly after Clara's evening out with her father, she takes a position as governess to a ten-year-old boy, Charles, at Maryhall. During her employment, she meets her future husband, Archie; Clara, Archie, and Charles play war games together. During one of these games, an unfortunate incident occurs: Charles jumps off a high wall, pretending to be a soldier like Archie, and breaks his neck.[[18]](#footnote-18) Fortunately his death is instantaneous. As a result of Charles's death, Clara goes into shock and spends many anguished days and sleepless nights filled with self-reproaches.

When Claude hears of the dreadful news, his reaction echoes the disgrace he suffered after he learned about Nanda's novel and the incident between Clara and Blaze Hoadley at Paget's Fold. When Patsy visits Claude to plead Clara's innocence in the circumstances surrounding Charles's death, Claude's feelings of anger at his daughter are transferred onto Patsy:

‘please, oh please don't be angry with her. She's so afraid you will be. She keeps saying it was her fault. But I'm sure it wasn't.’

‘I'm afraid I disagree.’ ...

‘The shock must have done something to her brain. She's got the most dreadful ideas. That she's disgraced you ...’

‘She has disgraced us all. ...

No doubt you mean well, Patricia. I should have had more respect for Clara if she hadn't sent you to get around me.’

... I came of my own accord ... I never dreamt ... you were always so kind.’

‘You flatter me,’ he said with a savage smile. He stood over her with his hands in his pockets glaring down at her. (275)

As with Clara, Claude is able to take command of the situation, asserting his masculinity as he glowers over Patsy. However, Claude believes that Patsy's motivation for the visit is to use her girlish charms on him. What emerges during this outburst are Claude's ambivalent feelings of love pitted against his need to induce fear.

This is an emotional state that Claude seems to possess; for example, on a previous occasion, the narrator describes Patsy as a ‘dark eyed, ivory beauty’, and, in passing, comments on how ‘Claude frowned a good deal over Patsy's appearance, though he privately found it attractive’ (163). Although Patsy's intentions are sexually innocent, Claude is excited at the prospect of having his way with a young woman who is pleading for his sense of compassion. In a disturbing scene that symbolises his unconscious conflicts of interest, Claude quizzes Patsy on her knowledge of boys who have been killed in war and then proceeds to seduce her:

‘Young men you know ... friends of yours ... have been killed, have they Patsy?’

‘Yes, several.’

Again he considered her. When he spoke again his voice was low, almost confiding-

‘You said just now that you liked men. Evidently men like you, too. Are you kind to them ... the boys who go out there?’

Nervous again, but in a different way, she drew herself further into the chair and asked:

‘What do you mean?’

He said, still more softly:

‘You know very well what I mean. Or do you think I am too old to understand or ... or ...’

Suddenly he swooped down and grasped one of her silken ankles, muttering in a thick voice:

‘You're made to attract, aren't you? Made to make people forget?’ ...

Please don't – *please*.’

‘You're not frightened of me *now*, are you, Patsy?’

He pulled her fur coat open and kissed her neck, almost groaning:

‘So white, so soft.’ (277-278)

Fortunately for Patsy, Claude is interrupted by the sound of Isabel returning home and is able to escape, but not before she notices his face convulse as he says ‘my wife’, thus replacing Patsy's feeling of repulsion with pity, in the belief that she understands why Claude made a sexual pass at her (278). Patsy makes a revealing statement: ‘I understand. I do understand. I won’t remember’, at which point he kisses her shoe in what seems to be blind passion (278).

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud observes that when children are chosen as sexual objects, ‘it is only exceptionally that children are the exclusive sexual objects.... They usually come to play that part when someone who is cowardly or has become impotent adopts them as a substitute, or when an urgent instinct ... cannot at the moment get possession of any more appropriate subject’ (148). This statement specifically addresses those children who are subjected to the incestuous act but can equally apply to a child outside of the family who is used as a surrogate. White’s intention for including the Patsy scene is puzzling. It could be, as Broe suggests, a way for White to talk about her father seducing her. If so, then it is an event that in real life she has kept secret. Today, society is more aware that victims of sexual abuse, and who remember the abuse, may still refuse to talk openly about it. (I will develop this discussion in my examination of contemporary trends of trauma in Chapter Four.) In contrast, White’s biographer Jane Dunn admits that White’s relationship with her father was ‘unhealthily close’ but she is also adamant that there was no hint of sexual impropriety on Cecil’s part. Dunn claims that White would have mentioned it; after all, she was very candid about her sexual sadomasochistic fantasies, whippings, and masturbatory habits (214-215). Dunn does suggest, however, that Cecil demonstrated a ‘repressed sexuality’ that emerged in romantic gestures that ‘inflamed Antonia's natural daughterly desire for her father into a complex of Electra-esque[[19]](#footnote-19) proportions’ (217). However, because White does not make a direct claim of sexual abuse herself, proving that sexual impropriety occurred is not possible, even though her relationship with her father does seem to correspond to a problematic Freudian Oedipal drama that is reenacted in her autobiographical novels.

In the throes of an Oedipus complex, Clara’s desire for her father is also predicated upon his desire for a son. To recapitulate, according to Freud in ‘The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex’, passage out of the Oedipus complex results in the little girl’s desire to bear her father a child, which is eventually abandoned because of his strong super-ego. Due to the girl’s weak super-ego, the desire to procreate continues into womanhood but is redirected: ‘The two wishes—to possess a penis and a child—remain powerfully cathected in the unconscious and help to prepare the female creature for her later sex role’ (179). In Freudian terms, her weak super-ego acts as the catalyst in her desire to procreate: ‘She slips – along the line of a symbolic equation, one might say—from the penis to a baby. Her Oedipus complex culminates in a desire, which is long retained, to receive a baby from her father as a gift—to bear him a child. One has an impression that the Oedipus complex is then gradually given up because this wish is never fulfilled’ (179).

Freud has the ‘impression’ that the Oedipus complex is discarded by girls, but there are theoretical problems when taking into consideration his castration complex model. In ‘Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes’ (1925), Freud states that, in contrast to a boy’s Oedipal desires being blasted due to a fear of castration, this fear is not present in girls because the castration has already occurred. Freud observes that the girl’s castration turns into penis envy, which leads to her wish for a child, or as Freud terms it, ‘a penis-child’ (256).[[20]](#footnote-20) Coupled with the little girl’s jealousy of her mother, whom the little girl perceives to be her father’s primary love object, the little girl seeks to usurp her mother’s position. What is particularly striking about Freud’s views at this point in his modification of the Oedipus complex is that the premise for his theory revolves around his low opinion of the emotional and ethical restraints of women:

I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. ... they show less sense of justice than men.... They are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life ... they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility – all these would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their super-ego. (257)

This is certainly an ambiguous statement to make that can be interpreted as a girl’s inability to navigate the Oedipus complex proper as effectively as boys. This, in turn, can cause problems for the father whose job it is to ensure that the girl’s Oedipal desires are not brought to fruition and thus can pass from the phallic phase to the genital phase with little to no complications.

Clara attempts to bear her father a son through marriage, and yet Clara's attraction to future suitors often reveals them as being impotent. This produces a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, as will be demonstrated, Clara's impotent suitors renew her Oedipal ties to her father because he seems more virile in comparison. On the other hand, Clara’s desire to produce a son for her father may stem from his own feelings of impotence that are projected onto her. After all, he was unable to produce a son himself in his marriage to Isabel, which mirrors the situation in his real counterpart’s history. When Clara and Archie marry in *The Sugar House* (1952), their marriage is never consummated, due to Archie's impotence, which draws a parallel with White’s first marriage to Reginald Green-Wilkinson (Reggie). [[21]](#footnote-21) What is most striking about Archie's physical impotence is that it stems from White's sense of self as a mutilated man. In a diary entry dated 30 November, 1937, White’s psychoanalyst, Dennis Carroll, observed that she was attracted to men who were impotent or homosexual. White notes how she

cannot help noticing that my affairs nearly always run the same course: a violent beginning on one side or the other: reluctance on one side or the other; sexual intercourse in which one or the other is frightened, frigid, or disappointed; a period during which I consciously or compulsively knot all the strings and try to provoke disaster; disaster which brings acute humiliation, sadness, sense of excitement, almost triumph ... / And it is very clear that a great part of my unconscious preoccupation is with the idea of myself as a mutilated man. (114)

This outcome is contrary to Freud's belief that a girl's early deterrence from sexual activity will lead to a healthy object-love. However, this rather depends on whether the man is impotent or not; after all, in Freudian terms, what can a girl do with a defective phallus except have it serve as a reminder of her own impotence as inferior to her male counterpart? On their marriage night in *The Sugar House*, Clara smells ‘the fumes of whisky’ on Archie’s breath and listens to his acknowledgement of his impotence made barely audible in a whisper: ‘“Clara … darling Clara,” he whispered. “Didn’t mean … Couldn’t …” The whisper became inaudible. He gave a grunting sigh, like a man in pain. The next moment he was fast asleep’ (126). This scene is followed by Clara having a disturbing dream:

She dreamt that her father came and rapped impatiently at the door, exactly as he had done while she was dressing for her wedding. Just as she was going to call him, she realised with horror that she was in bed with Archie. Overcome with shame and guilt, she crouched under the sheets, silent. The knocking grew more imperative; it sounded threatening. Then she remembered with relief that Archie was her husband. Her father had no right to be angry. She called nervously, ‘Come in, Daddy,’ and, in the effort of doing so, woke up. Someone was indeed knocking at the door, but softly and discreetly. (127)

It was the maid. What is particularly intriguing about this scene is its similarity to another sexually traumatic event in White’s life. Dunn makes reference to White’s first sexual encounter at her parents’ house with a man named Jim Dougal. White had been discharged from Bethlem Royal Hospital just six months earlier. Dougal was divorced and had captivated White with his charm and adventurous personality. He also impressed upon her sympathetic nature with a limp that he claimed to have incurred during the war. White’s attraction to Dougal increased due to his mutilated body because it reflected her own sense of mutilation.

One evening, Dougal stayed late talking to her father after she retired to bed. White was unaware that her father had invited Dougal to stay the night, until he slipped into her bedroom dressed in her father's robe and seduced her. White offered no signs of protest nor resistance. Dougal disappeared the next day leaving behind a legacy: White was pregnant. Unfortunately for White, so was Dougal’s wife. Dougal had lied about being divorced; in fact, his wife was about to deliver a baby. White's pregnancy was terminated with her father's financial help. Although a converted Catholic, White observes how her father was able to absolve himself from committing mortal sin by ‘shifting all the blame firmly on his daughter’s shoulders’ (Dunn 91).

After the abortion, the nurses told White that she would have given birth to a little boy. White’s response to this news is ambivalent. In an unpublished diary entry dated 15 March, 1949, she writes, ‘I did not seem to feel guilt about having had an abortion but just human sorrow because I had killed my little boy’ (91). Echoing Freud’s observation on a girl’s obsession with providing her father with a child, White’s desire for a son was a symbolic way to form a union with her father: ‘I can understand the extraordinary satisfaction of producing a son. A woman has not a penis but she can produce a being with a real penis’ (qtd. in Dunn 117). This scene, up to a point, offers White the opportunity to be at one symbolically with her father because, alternatively, the fact that she denies her father the right as grandfather to a baby boy is also indicative of the emotional turmoil she is experiencing in an attempt to separate the idea of her father as an authoritative parental figure and lover: she denies her father the one thing he truly wants, the one thing that she cannot physically give him – a son.

The circumstances in which White was seduced by Dougal suggest that she was blurring the boundaries between her father being a parent and lover, which captures the emotional conflict that she seems to be continually experiencing. Although it was Dougal in White's room that night, he was dressed in her father's robe. If Dougal was not in White’s father’s robe, would she have given herself to him so readily? Dunn asks, ‘Was this a psychologically safe way for her to fulfil her dream of incestuous love for her father?’ (217). Although Dunn concludes that White was driven by ‘intellectual curiosity’ rather than Oedipal ‘erotic impulses,’ she then refers to an intriguing confession by White in an unpublished diary: ‘Ten years later she described a dream in extraordinarily precise detail, in which she was ritually raped by her father. Antonia was unflinching about the sexual content, sensual but matter-of-fact in her description of the pressure of his penis and the mixture of terror and desire in her’ (219).

As illustrated, White’s relationship with her father is described with a particularly strong emphasis on sexual desires that filter into her autobiographical fiction as an Oedipal narrative. And yet, as also illustrated, Freud’s development of his Oedipus complex theory is problematic because, while it may be plausible for a child to favor one parent over the other and thus engage in Oedipal fantasies, his theory is severely restricted by his assumption that the male’s super-ego in matters of sexuality are stronger than his female counterpart’s. And yet, as will be illustrated, it is the aforementioned mixture of terror and desire that comes through most strongly in accounts of White’s descent into psychosis in her autobiographical fiction that raises questions about whether White herself was driven by Oedipal desires that led to her submitting herself to this kind of sexual traumata or if her psychosis is a defence mechanism against acknowledgement of real sexual abuse.

In *The Sugar House*, it is evident that Clara is starting to unravel mentally. She is in a marriage with an impotent man who serves as an image of her own impotence that, in turn, leads to a questioning of her sanity and sense of self:

The more she was alone, the more she became conscious of her own emptiness. Sometimes she even doubted whether she existed at all. Once this sense of non-existence was so acute that she ran up from the basement to the sitting-room full of mirrors almost expecting to find nothing reflected in them. But her face stared back at her anxiously from various angles ... [and] there was a vacancy in her expression that frightened her. She found herself addressing her reflection as she used to do when she was a child. ‘Really, my dear,’ she said severely, ‘You look as if you weren't in your right mind.’ (154)

From a Freudian perspective, signs of mental deterioration illustrate that Clara’s passage through the Oedipus complex has failed. It is a scenario with which White herself is also all too familiar. On 17 November, 1922, shortly after her own marriage to Reggie Wilkinson-Green falls apart and the marriage is annulled, twenty-three-year-old Antonia White is admitted into a mental asylum, Bethlem Royal Hospital. She is released nine months later. Upon admission, there are two categories for boarders: ‘voluntary’ and ‘certified’. Not yet officially divorced from Reggie, Mrs. Eirene Green-Wilkinson is admitted under the category, ‘certified’ (79). White’s engaging exploration into her own illness is extensively documented in her autobiographical short story, ‘The House of Clouds’, and in her final in a sequence of autobiographical novels, *Beyond the Glass*. In this autobiographical fiction, White’s alter egos, Helen and Clara, respectively, are haunted by delusions and hallucinations that infiltrate their waking lives.

White first documents her descent into psychosis in her autobiographical short story, ‘The House of Clouds’, in which references to water, fog, and sleep deprivation are recurring motifs. The story opens with the dramatic line, ‘The night before, Helen had tried to drown herself. She did not know why for she had been perfectly happy’ (45). After feeling tired during a dinner party, Helen walks outside to get some fresh air ‘out through the gate into the passage that led to the Thames. She wasn’t very clear what happened next. She remembered that Robert had carried her back to Dorothy’s room’ (45). Helen’s recollection of arriving at Dorothy’s house is ‘after walking for miles in the fog’, and when she’s in Dorothy’s bed, she cannot sleep and frequently wanders to the window to look out over the ‘foggy courtyard’ (46).

During Helen’s foggy moments, she begins to suffer from paranoid delusions and hallucinations. In ‘The House of Clouds’, Helen could not eat but eventually only accepts bread and salt: ‘She was insistent about the salt, because salt keeps away evil spirits …’ (45), and her hallucinations start with the arrival of a ghost of a priest who had just died ‘at that very moment in India’ (46-7). Often, Helen finds herself in a frightening place where images of religion, medicine, and war combine. For example, a priest and doctor come to Helen’s bed, the first in anticipation of a possible death and the second in anticipation of a possible life. In ‘The House of Clouds’, however, it is unclear if the father that comes into the room is a priest or Helen’s own father. As he approaches Helen ‘in a brown habit, like a monk … to kiss her … a real physical dislike of him choked her, and she pushed him away’ (47).

Helen’s impulsive and trance-like behaviour anticipates Clara’s descent into psychosis in *Beyond the Glass*. In this instance, readers are made privy to what happened at the Thames through the rescuer’s narrative. Clara embarks on her journey into the passage towards the Thames and is about to walk unawares into the Thames when Richard exclaims,

‘You little idiot,’ Richard’s furious voice said in her ear. ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ He dragged her back till she was out of reach of the water…. ‘If I hadn’t come running after you, you might have been drowned.’ / ‘I’m sorry,’ [Clara] said in the same mild voice. ‘I didn’t go down there deliberately. I just found myself going down it.’ (182)

Shortly into Clara’s courtship with Richard, she notices something that she had not thought of before: ‘Sleep was a sheer waste of time if one were really alive. Night after night she would lie awake, neither restless nor impatient for the next day…. She also began to discover that it was hardly necessary to eat…. She wondered if she ought to tell someone about these remarkable discoveries’ (144). Clara’s courtship with Richard ends soon after she is admitted into Bethlem. Richard finds out from Clara’s father that she is unlikely to recover and Richard subsequently marries a nice Catholic girl (228).

From a Freudian perspective, what may have happened to Clara is a ‘flight into psychosis’ (59).[[22]](#footnote-22) This state ‘eludes psychologico-clinical analysis’ as the ego may be wholly or partially detached from reality (59). Given Clara’s Oedipal drama, it may be possible to conclude that due to unacknowledged unconscious sexual desires for her father, she is now in a state of anxiety that then sends her spiraling into psychosis as a result of the non-resolution of the Oedipus complex. As early as 1894 in ‘Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory on Dreams’, Freud writes that, in a state of psychosis, the ‘ego creates, autocratically, a new external and internal world; and … this new world is constructed in accordance with the id’s wishful impulses, and that the motive of this dissociation from the external world is some very serious frustration by reality of a wish – a frustration which seems intolerable. The close affinity of this psychosis to normal dreams is unmistakable’ (151). This theory is modified in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Freud makes it clear that psychosis corresponds to unpleasurable waking dreams at the root of which is sexual anxiety produced by unconsciously unfulfilled sexual wishes. According to Freud, the key to psychosis is repression and its connection to the revival and suppression of painful memories that, in severe cases, will be consciously and willingly split off by the ego, should it not be able to cope with the anxiety associated with the memories. According to Freud, these traumatic memories bare no connection to reality. For White, however, her very identity is wrapped up in how her writing bears relation to her own sense of reality, which also reveals the contradictory nature of writing as an act of power and impotence.

In a diary entry dated 28 June, 1938, White expresses that when she writes in mirror-writing, she feels a surge of revenge: ‘Yes I will write backhand in spite of my father I WILL WILL WILL. Couldn't even write – filthy dirty beastly old man the way I WANTED TO – Well I will. You'll see. I spit on your corpse. You're dead and I'm alive.... I hope you've been punished. You punished me enough. I've forced myself to be sorry for you and admire you. You've ruined my life’ (140). And yet, just a year-and-a-half later, in a diary entry dated 4 December, 1939, White discovers during analysis ‘that the main cause of my own melancholia and paralysis was ... repressed rage.... What I feel when I begin to write anything is a complete lack of power. My mind seems to go to pieces’ (170).

In contrast, whilst in the asylum in *Beyond the Glass*, Clara can pick up a pencil and write backwards, as one was wont to do in Looking-Glass Land, and it is perfectly legible to her. And yet, it occurs to her that her father will not be able to understand her because he is on the other side. She picks up the pencil again and with great effort writes the proper way. Her letter reads: ‘Dearest Daddy, / I do not know where I am but I think it is Nazareth Royal Hospital.... Please try and find me. I want so much to see you again.... Perhaps you thought I was dead. I am alive but in a very strange place.... Your loving daughter, / Clara’ (245). Shortly after writing this letter, Claude comes to collect his daughter under the assumption that she has made a full recovery. But is this necessarily the case?

Clara seems to have returned from the void with a sense of self. However, this scene is also indicative of Clara's renewed ties to her father, wedged in the margin of narcissistic and Oedipal desires. She is still ‘alive’ but in a ‘strange place’. I cannot help but wonder if Clara is merely returning to the dark existence she has just left, which is effectively the authoritative patriarchal narrative of the father. Claude proceeds to make a quite fitting observation of Clara's time in the asylum: she was ‘unconscious, mercifully, most of the time’ (271). As it transpires, at the end of *Beyond the Glass*, upon recovery, White is delivered from her psychosis into her father’s care and protection.

As *Beyond the Glass* comes to a close, Richard, a possible suitor for Clara, finds out from Clara’s father that Clara is not likely to make a recovery for many years, so he moves on but not before leaving a precious gift, a little red purse that contains a rosary. After Nell gives Clara the purse, Clara finds herself back in the same courtyard before her descent into psychosis with a pulling tension between life and death weighing on her mind:

She stood for a while, clenching her wet eyelids together and clutching the little red purse. Then she became conscious of the faint sluck, sluck of the river. She remembered the narrow stone passage. A quiet, urgent impulse came over her to walk down it; to walk on and on with her eyes shut until it would be impossible to return. But, even more urgently, she felt the small weight pressing against her palm like a detaining hand. She forced herself to open her eyes. For a moment, she was no longer alone in the courtyard. She whispered, knowing that he heard: ‘Richard … I’ll hold on…. Go in peace.’ (285)

In this final scene, what seems to bring Clara back from the brink of disappearance is the one thing that haunted her waking and sleeping states of mind. She lets Richard go and returns to the love she knows, her father. In a diary entry dated 28 July, 1954, White herself was to confess that the idea of having an uncomplicated sexual relationship with a man is what drove her to madness. It is a fusion of sexuality with a combined attraction-repulsion relationship to death, which is symbolised in White’s writing and then distorted in recollection. These distortions, or metaphorical descriptions, illustrate how her traumatic experiences straddle a fine line between selfhood and writing within the confines of a larger patriarchal narrative through the mechanisms of the Oedipus complex.

White’s descent into psychosis raises questions for me about how sexual trauma itself is interpreted through a psychoanalytic lens. On the one hand, Freud’s position on psychosis has a close affinity with the non-resolution of the Oedipus complex. On the other hand, there are other avenues of interpretation, as will be illustrated in an examination of Sándor Ferenczi’s work on psychosis as a possible symptom of sexual trauma.

**Conflicting Psychoanalytic Theories of Sexual Trauma and Psychosis**

Freud’s position on psychosis, which cements his patriarchal view of women as inferior to their male counterparts, is a development of his earlier ideas on hysteria that is part of a larger psychoanalytic discussion between him and other major psychoanalytic theorists at the time. In his early development of paranoia and the role of the ego, Freud suggests in ‘The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence’ (1894) that, in a state of psychosis, the patient’s ego willingly attempts to forget and by ‘willingly’, Freud refers to a conscious act of repression. Nonetheless, should a person have suffered from a traumatic event, this forgetting usually leads to hysteria. In some cases, hysteria itself can lead to what Freud describes as ‘hallucinatory psychosis’ (48). He proposes that, initially, as in the case of hysterical individuals, a memory of a traumatic event becomes ‘innocuous’, and the ego is unable to cope with it, so the memory itself goes through a process of conversion. The original memory is seemingly eradicated by the ego. However, this is not the case because, in truth, it has merely been repressed, and in its place is what Freud describes as a ‘mnemic symbol’, a ‘sort of parasite … in the form of an unresolvable motor innervation or as a constantly recurring hallucinatory sensation, which persists until a conversion in the opposite direction takes place’ (49). This opposite direction is what leads the individual into a state of psychosis. There is treatment for this: due to the splitting being an act of will, one can be treated for psychosis through hypnosis in that it enables the analysand access to that part which has been split off (50). I propose that the split-off part is what constitutes the unconscious part of the ego, an alter ego, if you will, in the subject’s mind, which is perhaps what Freud is suggesting here.

The overriding point that Freud intends to make about psychosis in ‘The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence’ is that it is ‘the capacity for conversion’ from consciousness to unconsciousness that describes an hysteric’s journey into psychosis. Freud proceeds to write, ‘If someone with a disposition [to neurosis] lacks the aptitude for conversion, but if, nevertheless, in order to fend off an incompatible idea, he sets about separating it from its affect, then that affect is obliged to remain in the psychical sphere’ (52-53). To illustrate his point, Freud provides a case of a young girl whose ideas were so incompatible with the ego that the ego rejects them altogether, thus securing the young girl’s psychosis. In this case study, a girl gives her affections to a young man but is then subject to unrequited love. The girl’s ego could not accept this outcome and became ill, all the while in denial that this man would not someday come back to her for her hand in marriage. The descent into psychosis involved the hallucination that he did arrive and that she met him in the garden. This made her ecstatic and she lived in this state for two months.

In *The Major Symptoms of Hysteria: Fifteen Lectures Given in the Medical School of Harvard University* (1907), Pierre Janet returns to definitions of hysteria in order to make headway on the idea of dissociation and how a subject arrives at this point. In acknowledgement of some views at the time in which the hysteric suffers from fixed ideas that are then represented organically (e.g., M. M. Mathieu, Roux, Charcot, Moebius 325), Hippolyte Bernheim suggests, ‘the hysterical realises his accident just as he conceives it’ (qtd. in Janet 327). Even Freud and Breuer have been party to these same suggestions when they proclaim in their early work in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) that ‘the hysteric suffers mainly from reminiscences’ (42). Janet reminds the reader of Breuer and Freud’s observations on their definition of dissociation, which will become a key term in Janet’s subsequent explorations in an examination of the dissociative depths to which hysterics will go. Breuer and Freud state, ‘The disposition to this dissociation and, at the same time, the formation of states of consciousness, which we propose to collect under the name of hypnoid states,[[23]](#footnote-23) constitute the fundamental phenomenon of this neurosis’ (qtd. in Janet 332). While the focus is on neurosis in *Studies on Hysteria*, from which Janet pulled this statement,[[24]](#footnote-24) Freud and Breuer open the door to what led to later developments in psychosis by Ferenczi while bypassing a possible connection between psychosis and sexual trauma: ‘We have found … that a severe trauma (such as occurs in a traumatic neurosis) or a laborious suppression (as of a sexual affect, for instance) can bring about a splitting off of groups of ideas even in people who are in other respects unaffected; and this would be the mechanism of *psychically acquired hysteria*’ (47). The term psychically acquired hysteria suggests to me that psychosis itself is really an hysterical symptom, in Freudian terms, which blurs the meanings of neurosis and psychosis.

One case that is particularly striking in this regard is ‘From the History of an Infantile Neurosis’ (1918 [1914]) about Sergei Pankejeff (a.k.a., the famous Wolf Man), who suffered from ‘manic-depressive insanity’ (8). This case is one of the most clearly laid out descriptions of the primal scene as the source of infantile neurosis, the castration complex, and the beginning of a child’s journey through the Oedipus complex. It is also a striking case of sexual seduction in which Anna, the subject’s sister, also suffers from dementia praecox, commonly known as the early onset of psychosis in adolescence. Unfortunately, Freud does not make any connections between Sergei’s illness and his sister’s. He asserts that Sergei’s illness stems from his witnessing the primal scene, which Freud was able to deduce from dream interpretation.

Freud states that Sergei had been seduced by his sister Anna, who suffered from depression and ended up killing herself (21). However, at no point does Freud suggest that Anna was sexually seduced herself, even though there may have been indications of this seduction: ‘Towards the end of [Sergei’s] childhood there was an estrangement between him and his father. His father had an unmistakable preference for his sister, and he felt very much slighted by this’ (17). At the age of four or five, Anna had sat on her older cousin’s lap ‘and opened his trousers to take hold of his penis’ (21). When Anna poisoned herself after beginning to suffer from severe depression in her early twenties, Freud concludes that her death is attributable to hereditary dementia praecox (21).

In ‘The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis’ (1924), Freud writes: ‘There is nothing new in our characterisation of neurosis as the result of a repression that has failed’ (183). Where neurosis does not ‘disavow reality, it only ignores it; psychosis disavows it and tries to replace it…. and this is most radically effected by means of hallucination’ (185-86). In this brief statement, Freud clings to his view that there is no reality in the unconscious and in so doing maintains the position that fantasies are what constitute his subjects’ psychic lives, without really paying heed to the experience itself or its accompanying affect.

Freud’s views on sexual trauma and psychosis as non-resolution of the Oedipus complex by the time he wrote about this case had been firmly established in opposition to his earlier seduction theory. And yet there is one psychoanalyst who stood his ground, despite all the odds, and in the face of extreme scrutiny and ridicule: Sándor Ferenczi. He did not give up on Freud’s earlier seduction theory. In a diary entry dated July 24, 1932, in response to Freud’s concept of the Oedipus complex, Ferenczi argues that mechanisms attached to the complex may actually be ‘the result of real acts on the part of adults, namely violent passions directed toward the child, who then develops a fixation, not from desire [as Freud maintained], but from fear. ‘My mother and father will kill me if I don’t love them, and identify with their wishes’’ (qtd. in Masson 147). The child is placed under perpetual fear that if she does not acquiesce to her parents’ wishes, she will not be loved. Due to the child’s fear of her parents, she develops a ‘pathogenic defense mechanism’ that Ferenczi named ‘identification with the aggressor’ (qtd. in Masson 148).

Ferenczi makes one point clear and that is the relationship formed between the child and her aggressor creates an unhealthy, sadomasochistic situation:

In addition to passionate love and passionate punishments there is a third way of binding the child to oneself and that is the terrorism of suffering. Children have the compulsion to smooth over all kinds of disorders in the family, that is to say, to take onto their tender shoulders the burdens of all others; naturally, in the final analysis, not out of pure unselfishness but to regain the lost peace and the tenderness that is part of it. (qtd. in Masson 150)

In Ferenczi’s important paper ‘Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child’ (1933), he sets out to bring real sexual seductions of children back to the forefront of psychoanalytic attention.[[25]](#footnote-25) In his opening reference on the topic of sexual seduction, Ferenczi observes that

even children of very respectable, sincerely puritanical families, fall victim to real violence or rape much more often than one had dared to suppose…. The immediate explanation – that these are only sexual fantasies of the child, a kind of hysterical lying – is unfortunately made invalid by the number of such confessions, e.g., of assaults on children, committed by patients actually in analysis. (161)

In an examination of the sexual perpetrator’s reasoning behind his seduction, Ferenczi states how, for example, in a child’s harmless fantasized role playing as an adult, he or she may oftentimes behave in a manner that is perceived by a pathological adult as not a demonstration of tenderness but of eroticism. What ensues is that the adult misperceives the child’s playfulness as ‘desires of a sexually mature person or even allow themselves—irrespective of any consequences—to be carried away’ (161).

Furthermore, Ferenczi states,

It is difficult to imagine the behaviour and the emotions of children after such violence. One would expect the first impulse to be that of reaction, hatred disgust and energetic refusal … if it had not been paralysed by enormous anxiety. These children feel physically and morally helpless, their personalities are not sufficiently consolidated in order to be able to protest, even if only in thought, for the overpowering force and authority of the adult makes them dumb and can rob them of their own senses. The same anxiety, however, if it reaches a certain maximum, compels them to subordinate themselves like automata to the will of the aggressor, to divine each one of his desires and to gratify these; completely oblivious of themselves they identify themselves with the aggressor. Through the identification, or let us say, introjection of the aggressor,[[26]](#footnote-26) he disappears as part of the external reality … the attack as a rigid external reality ceases to exist and in the traumatic trance the child succeeds in maintaining the previous situation of tenderness. (162)

In the child’s silence, she is then forced into an identification with the aggressor (as aforementioned by Masson) by way of introjection,[[27]](#footnote-27) one that can potentially and paradoxically become positive for the child because she is still receiving some form of tenderness. Nonetheless, due to the adult’s unconscious sense of remorse as a result of anger at his own actions, this unconscious sense of guilt is also projected on to the child, and in turn introjected by the child. The child is often punished for the adult’s actions but often feels deserving of this punishment (162). It is important to note that the child, nonetheless, is at all times in a passive role. Somehow, this very important paper became lost in the wave of Freudian observations in connection to the Oedipus complex and its non-resolution that can lead to hysteria and/or psychosis.

According to Ferenczi, in order to cope with the trauma of engaging in incestuous relations, psychosis is symptomatic of a child’s unconscious defence mechanism. He observes that ‘trauma involves an enduring division of the personality, in which one dissociative part manifests itself as “the guard against dangers … and the attention of this guard is almost completely directed to the outside. It is only concerned about dangers, i.e., about objects in the outside world all of which can become dangerous”’ (qtd. in Van der Hart *et al*. 50).

According to Masson, Freud was among the number who sought to ostracise Ferenczi from the psychoanalytic group for his views. Masson argues that Ferenczi’s paper presented to the 12th International Psycho-Analytic Congress in Wiesbaden, September 1932,met with the same public display of disgust as Freud’s paper in 1896: ‘The dissemination of such views constituted a danger to society’ (Masson 151). Masson also states that Ferenczi’s paper was not published and that his untimely death gave his colleagues an opportunity to go against his wishes of having the paper published because, as Jones writes in an unpublished letter to Freud on June 3, 1933, ‘Its scientific contentions and its statements about analytic practice are just a tissue of delusions, which can only discredit psychoanalysis and give credit to its opponents’ (qtd. in Masson 152). However, according to Michael Balint, ‘Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child’ was initially entitled, ‘The Passions of Adults and their Influence on the Sexual and Character Development of Children’ and was published in 1933.[[28]](#footnote-28) Ferenczi’s paper was also later published by Michael Balint in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* in 1949.

More recently, there has been a strictly scientific exploration into a relationship between psychosis and sexual abuse that validates Ferenczi’s findings and echoes some of White’s own descriptions of her feelings of losing sanity and her sense of self. In ‘Psychotic Experiences in People Who Have Been Sexually Assaulted’ (2008), Aoiffe M. Kilcommons *et al*. conducted a study of a control group that included forty survivors of sexual assault. In this study, Kilcommons *et al*.’s objective is to find a connection between psychosis and sexual abuse that includes an examination of psychological factors that contribute to the psychosis, namely dissociation. Kilcommons *et al*.’s initial findings suggest that ‘a significantly higher rate of psychotic phenomena (delusional ideation and predisposition to hallucinations) was found in the sexually assaulted group compared to the control group’ (602).36 Interestingly, the sample came from police and court records after the abused had received some form of support. Read and Hammersley, however, argue that Spataro *et al*.’s findings do not take into consideration those who do not make it to court and do not receive support to help them deal with their experiences, often resulting in more severe psychotic episodes (603).

Kilcommons *et al*. also break psychosis itself down into relevant categories. The type of childhood assault may determine the kind of psychotic experience. For example, delusions are more likely to occur in those who have endured physical assault, whereas hallucinations are typically within the realm of childhood sexual assault. Again, why this is the case is not developed, but Kilcommons *et al*. have done their research and draw on important observations made by Allen and Coyne who suggest that

trauma-induced dissociative symptoms may place the individual at risk of having a psychotic experience. They propose that dissociative detachment undermines the individual’s grounding in the outer world, thereby hampering reality-testing and rendering the individual with post-traumatic symptoms ‘vulnerable to the nightmarish inner world’. (qtd. in Kilcommons 332)

Kilcommons *et al*. further hypothesise that severe dissociative detachment leaves individuals vulnerable to psychosis because internal anchors—the sense of being connected to one’s body, a sense of self or identity, one’s own actions—do not appear to exist. This may not only impair reality testing but also result in severe confusion, disorganization, and disorientation (604). Of importance is Kilcommons *et al*.’s findings; they observe how experiencing trauma can also ‘shatter one’s basic assumptions about the self (self-worth, vulnerability), the world and others (in relation to fairness, dangerousness, trustworthiness, equality), and with the suggestion that traumatic experiences may confer vulnerability to the development of psychosis via cognitive and behavioural processes’ (609).

While some important observations are made by both Allen and Coyle and Kilcommons *et al*., what is not addressed is why psychosis may be a product of sexual assault. Nonetheless, they do suggest that it comes about as a result of extreme mental distress, in which case psychosis is one of many possible responses to a traumatic event (608). Although Kilcommons *et al*.’s study in particular has some limitations, i.e., the results are generated from self-report measures, as opposed to structured clinical interviews, this study is still important in that it identifies a need for a possible correlation between sexual assault and psychosis to be taken seriously (609).

It is becoming increasingly common to consider the correlation between sexual trauma and psychosis. In the past couple of years, research into psychosis and sexual trauma has picked up. In ‘Childhood Trauma and Psychosis: What is the Evidence’ (2011), Helen Fisher offers further support for studies that propose a correlation between sexual abuse and psychosis with the following typical symptoms:

Childhood sexual abuse has specifically been linked to hallucinations and delusions and the content of these positive symptoms may be related to patients' traumatic experiences. Psychotic patients with a history of childhood trauma tend to present with a variety of additional problems, similar to that of other populations with childhood trauma. Victims of abuse report increased levels of suicidal ideation and more frequent suicide attempts. They have also been reported to be less able to sustain intimacy, and to be more prone to emotional instability. (par. 4)

Andrew D. Thompson *et al*.’s article ‘Sexual Trauma Increases the Risk of Psychosis in an Ultra High-Risk ‘Prodromal’ Population’ (2013), provides findings of a self-report questionnaire:

Data were available on 233 individuals. Total [Childhood Trauma Questionnaire] CTQ trauma score was not associated with transition to psychosis. Of the individual trauma types, only sexual abuse was associated with transition to psychosis (*P* = .02). The association remained when adjusting for potential confounding factors. Those with high sexual abuse scores were estimated to have a transition risk 2–4 times that of those with low scores. The findings suggest that sexual trauma may be an important contributing factor in development of psychosis for some individuals. (1)

Furthermore, Thompson *et al.* note that ‘the higher the sexual abuse score, the higher the risk of transition to a psychotic disorder in the medium-to-long term. This was not the case for other types of trauma or total trauma score’ (5). What the study also observes is that what the psychotic disorder shows by way of symptoms is ‘a disruption of ‘internal anchors’ of the sense of self, resulting from dissociative detachment’ (7).

Given conflicting psychoanalytic positions on sexual trauma and White’s protagonist’s Oedipal narrative that leads to a descent into psychosis, there are two different views of the relationship between her psychosis and sexual trauma. Is it possible that White’s account of her dreams is intricately connected to repressed sexual desires that have become distorted in a state of psychosis as a result of extreme emotional angst? Or, is it the case that her psychosis is actually evidence of a psychological reaction to a real experience of sexual abuse that has been repressed but comes out in psychotic symptoms? Ultimately, the reader is presented with two diametrically opposed views, where the similarity is repression but the difference is that one side pertains to fantasies of unfulfilled sexual desires and a failure to navigate the Oedipus complex; the other side pertains to a descent into psychosis that is symptomatic of a psychological reaction to a real traumatic sexual experience.

While both Freud’s and Ferenczi’s views present viable positions on the correlation between psychosis and sexual trauma, in this chapter, what I have sought to illustrate through White’s life and autobiographical fiction is that her life was an Oedipal drama, and as a result of this, she appropriated a Freudian Oedipal narrative in her autobiographical fiction. However, at no time does White overtly state that she was a victim of father-daughter incest. Undergoing Freudian psychoanalytic treatment herself, this should come as no surprise because she may have perceived her traumatic relationships with her parents against the backdrop of an Oedipal narrative. White’s autobiographical fiction, therefore, does more than highlight the complexities associated with conflicting psychoanalytic stances on sexual trauma. In no other autobiographical fiction is an Oedipal drama so poignantly described that also places a spotlight on problems inherent in Freud’s Oedipus complex theory.

Although there are present ruptures in White’s Oedipal narrative that could signal the presence of a history of sexual abuse, for example, as illustrated in her references to psychosis in her autobiographical fiction, White’s stint in Bethlem Royal Hospital is not described at any great length in her diaries. How much stock can readers place in White’s accounts of psychosis in her autobiographical fiction, a genre that blurs the lines between reality and fiction, being an authentic description of any lived traumatic experience? It is to this question that I shall turn my attention in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Psychosis: A Crisis of Self-Expression in Antonia White’s

‘The House of Clouds’ and *Beyond the Glass*

*Form and Theory of Autobiographical Novel (on Personality)*

*Memory and Identity – Psychosis and Agency of Alter Ego*

In the previous chapter, I addressed the sexual trauma argument through opposing psychoanalytic perspectives. However, it is important to take into consideration the genre in which White chose to write about her experiences, the autobiographical novel, which blends non-fiction with fiction. Early on in her writing, White struggled with the idea of writing autobiographical fiction because she wanted to write real novels. After accepting that the best material for her to write about was her life, White sought to find a balance between writing a personal testimony of her traumatic experiences and appealing to literary aesthetic values. From a literary scholar’s perspective, this is a challenging undertaking. How much stock can readers place in White’s autobiographical novels being true reflections of any lived traumatic experiences? Providing an answer to this question is not an easy task because writing in any autobiographical genre, whatever degree of truth is purported, produces ambiguity.

This chapter will be divided into three sections that address these knotted areas of authenticity, memory, and identity. The first section will discuss the form and theory of the autobiographical novel in an examination of Phillipe Lejeune’s text, *On Autobiography* (1989). Although other writers have expressed views on autobiographical fiction as a genre, such as Elizabeth W. Bruss, James Olney, and, more recently, Leigh Gilmore, for my purpose, I delve more deeply into Lejeune as an authority whose thinking on personality and memory is aligned with dominant historical perspectives of authorship against a backdrop of controversial critical literary theories and criticism on authorial intention at the time in which White was producing her autobiographical fiction. Key thinkers in this controversy are E. M. W. Tillyard, C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley. In the second section, I juxtapose literary and psychoanalytic writings on psychosis in a development of the previous line of inquiry. In an exploration of the limitations and possibilities of authenticating narratives of psychosis as a means to generating coherent and viable meaning, I argue, in the third section, for a space to be carved for White’s autobiographical fiction to be taken seriously as creative works that aspire to both an authentic expression of personal experience and aesthetic values.

The arguments I put forward oppose what I perceive to be literary theoretical structures that have developed analyses of the author’s conscious and unconscious ways of communication using linguistic arguments that have no bearing themselves on lived reality. For example, in a development of Freud’s views on psychosis from a psychoanalytical linguistic perspective, Jacques Lacan purports that it is impossible to authenticate narratives of psychosis and draw any meaningful value from them as readers because they lack a coherent transfer of metaphorical language from the unconscious to the conscious. He uses Judge Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903) to support his case, which is certainly valid from a technical standpoint. However, he does not give due credit to Schreber’s attempts to grapple with sexual and spiritual preservation and suicidal tendencies through the agency of his alter egos; these are similarities Schreber shares with White’s alter egos in ‘The House of Clouds’ and *Beyond the Glass*. In a similar vein to Lacan’s thinking, post-structuralist literary critic Paul de Man seeks to reduce the visual recollection of experiences to a linguistic structure due to his notion that visual recollections captured linguistically have no value because past experiences cannot be restored just as they were. It is the same complaint he had with the Romantics. Similarly, it is also a concern that Lejeune expresses in his analysis of the relationship between author, narrator, and protagonist. Nonetheless, these analyses denounce the autobiographical subject’s testimony and, in so doing, have created an elitist separatism between autobiographical narratives and pure fiction; this discrimination between the genres has also served to silence authorial voices of trauma.

Whilst an account of subjective truth with regard to psychosis as a viable representation of objective reality, for example, would certainly be subject to scrutiny, I place a spotlight on how White’s experiences—and my willingness as a reader to listen to those experiences as she relates to them—shape her personality and sense of being. White’s testimony of psychosis in her autobiographical fiction is complicated by a tension between attempts to secure some kind of agency through her writing within the confines of a patriarchal Oedipal narrative; it is this collision that shapes her testimony in its raw portrayal of an identity in crisis.

**Form and Theory of Autobiographical Novel (on Personality)**

Following the publications of White’s short stories ‘The House of Clouds’ and ‘The Saint’ in *Life and Letters* in the late 1920s, Antonia White’s eldest daughter, Susan Chitty, remarks, ‘Two stories written from personal experience had been taken by a prestigious review. It was hardly surprising that she started to favor autobiographical fiction…. A letter from Desmond McCarthy still exists, asking permission to say that the writer is describing an actual experience’ (25). Similarly, reviews on *Frost in May* indicate how critics related to the novel in connection to real life. For example, the portrayal of Nanda's father in such a damning light horrified reviewers: ‘All refused to believe in his terrible verdict’ (25). One critic who was particularly disturbed by how the nuns treated Nanda vowed that he would never send ‘any child of *his* to a convent’ (25; emphasis in original).

Whilst White bathed in the wonderful reception of her early work in the 1920s and 1930s, by the 1950s, reviews had become more critical. In a diary entry dated 21 August, 1954, White paints a less vibrant picture:

Once again the same contradictions in the reviews. I’m too emotional or too cold and detached. The stories are straight from life or they ‘creak mechanically’. I need to ‘go into training’ or I have ‘brilliant technique’. I am constantly accused of inventing graphic reports of experience. I am said to have a ‘hard, bright talent’, a ‘creepy’ one, to be ‘entertaining’, to leave an indescribably nasty taste in the mouth. One critic dismisses ‘The House of Clouds’ as ‘fantasy’ having no relation to clinical madness! … What always hurts me is when I am accused of ‘faking’. (281)

As illustrated, reviews of White’s work have shifted from a mere appreciation of her testimonial experiences in her autobiographical novels to reviews that also include sceptical responses with regard to aesthetic values and authenticity of experience. While White is evidently upset by the later reviews, she has already acknowledged the difficulty of writing a testimony of her life as a work of art. In a diary entry dated 30 December, 1940, White describes her authorial intention: ‘My job in life is to be able to give a form of writing to certain experiences…. It’s a kind of testimony, if you like, and difficult to make both honest and at the same time a work of art, something consistent with itself and complete and not just “reporting” or “a slice of life”’ (*The Hound and the Falcon* 38). It is interesting that White felt the need to balance her testimony with aesthetic values because it indicates an awareness of the critical literary climate at the time, well before the later reviews came out.

In *Now to My Mother* (1985), Susan Chitty’s memoir on White, she remarks that ‘Antonia White’s four novels were largely autobiographical, so much so that some might question the necessity of writing anything more about her. But the novels ceased when Antonia (Clara) was still in her early twenties, newly released from a lunatic asylum. And there is anyway no such thing as an autobiographical novel. The author is bound to bend events to conform to some design and even invent material to “liven things up”’ (xiv). There are inventions in White’s autobiographical novels. In a diary entry dated 27 August, 1951, shortly after the publication of *The Lost Traveller*, White reflects on what she terms a ‘hybrid’ piece:

Lots of it I had no control over. A lot invented. Isabel and Callaghan. The odd intrusion of Charles’s death. Then all that trouble over the end…. This one [*The Sugar House*] should be simpler … undoing what I did in *The Lost Traveller* and getting the marriage on again. What I have got to face and interpret now is all that queer, horrid Chelsea time leading up to the asylum – a time which seems particularly unreal and fantastic. And I have to simplify it quite brutally. (235)

Given the genre in which White is writing, the words autobiographical (real) and fiction (imaginative) present the reader with an oxymoron. How can readers identify aspects of White’s autobiographical novels that are testimonial in nature and aspects that are fictional? When White was publishing her autobiographical fiction, predominantly between the 1920s and 1950s, the term ‘autobiographical novel’ had not yet been invented. In the introduction to *The Sugar House*, Elizabeth Bowen refers to White’s work as ‘personal novels’ (qtd. in Callil, Introduction). In his essay ‘The Autobiographical Pact’,[[29]](#footnote-29) Lejeune suggests that clear parameters should be established to distinguish between the autobiographical novel and the autobiography proper. According to Lejeune, an ‘*autobiographical pact*’ can be established in one of two ways: 1) there is an implicit understanding between reader and author that the ‘I’ in the title or at the beginning of the work refers to the author, even if the author’s name is not mentioned in the text; 2) an explicit understanding is that the author, narrator, and protagonist share the same name, and the text is written in the first person. If either criterion can be established, a book can be defined as autobiographical (12-14).

The autobiographical novel, however, requires a more complex evaluation. According to Lejeune, the autobiographical novel differentiates itself from the purely autobiographical by not being a ‘retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality’ (4). Lejeune suggests that the autobiographical novel does not fulfil the requirements of the autobiographical pact because the ‘I’ cannot be established literally between author, narrator, and protagonist. An autobiographical novel functions by ‘*degrees*’ (13; emphasis in original). In other words, there may be some slight resemblance between the author and the main protagonist, or there could be what appears to be a much closer resemblance that would make readers suspect that the author and main protagonist are one and the same person, but neither scenario can be proven. The key word here is *suspect* because without the author using his or her name directly in the autobiographical novel, the reader cannot reasonably claim that the two personalities are the same person. The author can choose to deny the similarities in personality and experiences. Lejeune clearly states, ‘Autobiography does not include degrees: it is all or nothing…. The hero can resemble the author as much as he wants; as long as he does not have his name, there is in effect nothing’ (13). For Lejeune, the autobiographical novel generates a ‘*fictional pact*’ between author and reader in a mutual understanding that readers do not expect to hear the truth (16).

In ‘The Autobiographical Pact (bis)’ published eleven years after the original essay in 1975, Lejeune reflects upon his earlier statements, oscillating between self-criticism and justification. For example, with regard to his dogmatic definition of autobiography as it should be—a prose narrative written about the self’s history by the self—Lejeune confesses that he is guilty of blending ‘theoretical hypothesis’ with ‘normative assertion’ (120). He had not intended his theories to become, as they have done, rules to follow, but rather points of discussion. That being said, he has no regrets because he justifies his ‘authority’ on the subject of the autobiographical genre as one that ‘corresponds to a need’ (121). He was the man who cut the ‘Gordian knot’[[30]](#footnote-30) of autobiographical definition (121). And yet, it seems to me that Lejeune’s definition of what autobiography should be is restrictive. Emphasising problems of ambiguity is valid; however, Lejeune makes no attempt to reference complex underlying psychological issues that may contribute to, for example, an ambiguous author-protagonist relationship, which is imperative in an examination of trauma narratives.

There was a time when the autobiographical novel would have been accepted as a valid means of recounting one’s life. Lejeune quotes Gustave Vapereau, who wrote the following definition of autobiography in the *Universal Dictionary of Literature*, 1876: ‘AUTOBIOGRAPHY … literary work, novel, poem, philosophical treatise, etc., whose author intended, secretly or admittedly, to recount his life, to expose this thoughts or to describe his feelings’ (qtd. in Lejeune 123). Similarly, in his essay, ‘Autobiography and the Cultural Moment’ (1980),[[31]](#footnote-31) James Olney’s response to Nietzsche’s comment that ‘Little by little it has become clear to me that every great philosophy has been the confession of its maker, as it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography’ and to Paul Valéry, who claimed that his poem, *La Jeune Parque*, was autobiographical, Olney writes, ‘It leaves us at least with the perception that what is autobiography to one observer is history or philosophy, psychology or lyric poetry, sociology or metaphysics to another’ (5). Moreover, as illustrated in this example here, one’s autobiography can be known or hidden, even from the writer. Olney goes on to suggest that even the literary critic is ‘a closet autobiographer’ (5).

Olney’s position on the relationship between autobiography and fiction is developed in his book, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (1981). He suggests that what is needed are not definitions but examinations into why autobiographical narratives are written. He believes that it is ‘the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create and that, in the end, determines both the nature and the form of what he creates’ (Olney 3). However, for Olney, all writing is autobiographical because whatever form it takes, writing ‘will express and reflect its maker’ (3). In other words, one cannot separate the writer from his personality.

Lejeune understands that reading a work that may be secret has a limitation of ambiguity, and yet the possibility of opening up a new space for the reader’s interpretation, as well as, and perhaps most importantly, ‘new strategies of writing’ for the author (124). In other words, as Lejeune himself admits, there does not need to be an ‘explicit contract’ (126). Lejeune identifies the autobiographical novel as a paradox: ‘to be at the same time a truthful discourse and a work of art’, a point that White had already figured out (128). This statement leads me to conclude that Lejeune does not regard the autobiographical novel in terms of an unworkable contradiction, but as a genre that can be approached from one angle or the other if the reader is given more interpretive license and the author a space to explore feelings outside the textual application of ‘I’. This position does not negate the fact, however, that Lejeune is at his most comfortable when he can place genres into neat categories. Where to place the autobiographical novel has proven to be a perplexing task for him.

How to make a distinction between truthful discourse and fiction is a concern that Elizabeth W. Bruss explores in her book, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (1976). In her pursuit of ‘literal identity’, Bruss discovers that it is culture that determines how autobiographical narratives are written and perceived by others. Citing *Psalms* as an example of ‘a personal history’, Bruss writes, ‘The distinction between an idealised individual narrator and a particular, identifiable speaker is alien to the psalmist…. What is autobiography for us may have originally been only the by-product of another act’ (6). In other words, autobiography is what a particular culture makes of it. For me, this raises a question: how does a particular culture determine what separates fiction from non-fiction or, more specifically, the author from his or her protagonist? I would like to take a moment to put these views into historical perspective because White was writing in a literary period in which the relationship between author and protagonist was most subject to scrutiny.

There are two main competing axioms in early twentieth century literary criticism: the author’s protagonist reflects the author’s personality and experiences, opposed to the position that the protagonist does not reflect the author’s personality and experiences because the author aspires to larger universal ideals and consciousness. This debate is most aptly demonstrated in the engaging intellectual fencing match between C. S. Lewis and E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (1939) about the poet’s relationship[[32]](#footnote-32) with his work.

Romantic critics like William Wordsworth, whilst acknowledging the impossibility of mimesis,[[33]](#footnote-33) sought to bridge the gap between the feelings of the poet with his poetic speaker and, at the same time, appeal to aesthetic values. In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), Wordsworth writes,

However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a poet, it is obvious that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure. (308)

In an attack on Romantic critics like Wordsworth, in *The Personal Heresy*, C. S. Lewis coined the term ‘personal heresy’ and is of the opinion that ‘the real poet is a man who has already escaped from … emotion sufficiently to see it objectively…. The man who cries out with pain is not the same as the man who vividly expresses to us the blood-curdling nature of the cry’ (9-10). While this comment does not necessarily provide a clean rebuttal of Romantic views on the poet’s relationship with his speaker, C. S. Lewis stipulates the need to separate the artist’s personality from his art:

My objection to the poet’s personality is that it is an intruder in this imagined world―an intruder, I may add, from a much higher realm―and that his presence amidst his own creations, if it occurred, would demand from me, at the same moment, two incompatible responses. For Shakespeare was a real man. My response to the real both is and ought to be quite distinct from my response to the imaginary. (61)

One could deduce from Lewis’s comment that art does not contain a real personality. In a way, he would be right because fiction, whether intended to be based on lived experience or not, is still an artistic creation. It is a nod to the school of New Criticism[[34]](#footnote-34) that fuels Lewis’s literary conviction on personality. T. S. Eliot, a leader in what is perceived as a modern ‘formalist’ way of thinking about criticism in relation to a focus on the language of the text itself, reinforces the need to move away from the personal with a higher aim in mind.[[35]](#footnote-35) In ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), Eliot asserts that what makes a writer ‘traditional’ is the capacity to have an historical awareness of his craft. A writer uses his historical awareness to symbolize his contemporaneity. To elaborate upon this point, Eliot suggests that the poet needs to develop a consciousness of the past in an awareness of the poetry that has come before as a poetry that is living and existing simultaneously in the present. Timeless and temporal consciousness is transformed into a state of mind in poetry and is more important than the individual poet’s consciousness. The poet’s poetry becomes part of a larger developing consciousness.

For Eliot, in order to embrace a collective vision, a process of depersonalization must occur. The poet must continually surrender the self to a more significant consciousness than his or her own, which requires ‘self-sacrifice’ and the ‘extinction of personality’ (500). Eliot seeks to achieve this objectivity by way of the ‘objective correlative’, a mechanism used earlier by the metaphysical poets to express emotion in the form of art via imagined sensory impressions. The evoked emotion correlates to an appropriate external factor, such as a situation or a series of events. The function of the objective correlative suggests that the poet is also the ‘catalyst’ of the poem, the external factor that manipulates feelings and emotions in order to fuse them and create a new combination. So, what we learn is that each work of art, therefore, should be ‘objective and impersonal, and yet profoundly moving’ (500). Virginia Woolf expressed a similar sentiment in her writing. In a diary entry dated November 18, 1920, she asserts that writing ‘must be formal. The art must be respected. This struck me reading some of my notes here, for, if one lets the mind run loose, it becomes egotistic: personal, which I detest’ (321).[[36]](#footnote-36)

In retort to this literary mindset, Tillyard makes a pertinent observation that speaks to the larger implications of this debate:

And [Lewis] comes to the conclusion that for the poet the mind of Europe and of his own country is much more important that his own private mind. Now these sentiments are not only close to Mr. Lewis’s but they agree with a strong modern tendency … to belittle the individual in comparison with the race…. Whatever the fate of this tendency―it may peter out in a few years for all we can tell―at the moment it is modern, and the opposite tendency to cling to the personal, even if fated shortly to prevail, just fails to be modern. (32)

Tillyard does concede that ‘the mixture of biography and criticism, even when most justified by the nature of the author, has its besetting danger: it is all too easy for the reader to use biography as an illegitimate short cut into the poet’s mental pattern as revealed in his poems’ (43). In a likeminded vein, C. S. Lewis admits, ‘Nor do I deny that there are borderline cases―things which might plausibly be reckoned either as imaginative literature or as instances of that truly personal writing which is but talking at a distance’ (61). However, these caveats became lost in a growing surge of attention paid to the negative impact of taking seriously authorial intention.

Consistent with Eliot’s assertion about the impersonality of poetry in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley’s essay, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ (1946), addresses the limitations of authorial intention and provides a recommended role for the critic. Wimsatt and Beardsley put forward the argument that the work of art itself should be interpreted and not the intentions of the artist, which are hidden from us and no subject for our concern. Wimsatt and Beardsley ask: ‘How is [the critic] to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem’ (749). Wimsatt and Beardsley believe that if judgment is to be aesthetic, it must concern itself with the given object; the meanings that we attribute to the object are those that we see in the text, regardless of what the artist may or may not have intended. What matters is that the poem works like a ‘pudding’ or ‘machine’ (749).

Wimsatt and Beardsley do warn the reader of the danger of confusing the ‘personal’ with ‘poetic studies’ (753), which is a sentiment later shared by Paul de Man in ‘Autobiography as De-facement’ (1979):

By making autobiography into a genre, one elevates it above the literary status of mere reportage, chronicle, or memoir and gives it a place, albeit a modest one, among the canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres. This does not go without some embarrassment, since compared to tragedy, or epic, or lyric poetry, autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values. (919)

There is no guarantee that those who aspire towards that ‘monumental dignity’ successfully produce a fictional piece of work of any merit, while others who put their lives, relationships, and emotions openly on display—because all fiction to some extent is self-indulgent—do so with poetic sophistication, like White.

Even though White writes in the third person narrative in her autobiographical fiction, she is torn between not wanting to write autobiographically and admitting that her work is autobiographical. For example, in a diary entry dated 26 Jan, 1933, the seeds of an idea are put forth: ‘I am beginning to toy with the idea of doing a book about my father. I have always wanted to do a sort of memoir about him’ (20). Indeed, a large focus of *The Lost Traveller* is the turbulent Oedipal relationship between Clara and Claude Batchelor that draws an interesting parallel with White’s relationship with her father, a point I make and develop in Chapter One. Nonetheless, shortly before the publication of *The Lost Traveller*, White contemplates writing a sequel to it. In a diary entry dated 26 February, 1950, she writes, ‘There is no reason why I should not, like Proust and Duhamel continue with the same set of characters…. One immediate difficulty – it must be related to *The Lost Traveller* which is not of course literally autobiographical’ (218). She then goes on to say that ‘It might be possible to place the father’s death in this book which would make the Archie [a fictional Reggie] marriage more convincing’ (218-219).

When writing *The Lost Traveller*, White felt ill at ease writing a novel that had more fictional elements than *Frost*. Indeed, she lamented that she had not made *The Lost Traveller* ‘a proper sequel to *Frost*’ (235). She writes, ‘Everything that happened to Clara in *The Lost Traveller* is the sort of thing that happened to me, though many things are changed, many invented. I wanted *The Lost Traveller* to be a real novel – *Frost in May* was so much my own life. So I changed her name …’ (qtd. in Callil, Introduction).

Where to situate the locus of the author’s name is a controversial feature of the autobiographical novel. According to Lejeune, ‘We must not confuse *pseudonym*, defined in this way as the name of *an author* (*noted on the cover of the book*), with the *name* attributed to a fictional person *within the book* (even if this person has the status of narrator and assumes the whole of the text production), because this person is himself designated as fictitious by the simple fact that he is incapable of being the *author* of the *book*’ (12; emphasis in original). It seems to me that this statement provides a concrete application of the word ‘pseudonym’ that ignores any abstract notions of personality on a psychological level. Although White changed her name, with regard to the psychological impact of her relationships with others, this is, essentially, the only intentional change she made. In an unpublished diary entry dated 10 June, 1955, White states, ‘I long for something fresh, something unconnected with my wretched self. Yet I seem quite incapable of invention’ (Dunn 48). That being said, as with Tillyard and C. S. Lewis, Wimsatt and Beardsley do acknowledge that, while one should be wary of confusing personal authorial motivations with an objective study of the text, ‘the meaning of a poem may certainly be a personal one, in the sense that a poem expresses a personality or state of soul’ (750). They do stress, however, that when making a connection between the ‘dramatic *speaker*’ and the author, it should be accompanied by some ‘biographical inference’ (750; emphasis in original).[[37]](#footnote-37)

White’s autobiographical fiction certainly ‘expresses a personality’ and ‘state of soul’. In an examination of autobiographical fiction, there needs to be a relationship between author, protagonist, and reader. At face value, this may seem like a humanistic approach to reading literature, and in a way it is, because, as a reader, I give White, for example, the right to engage in the act of self-exploration, but to do so through the agency of her alter egos and not the authorial ‘I’. Against the backdrop of her diaries and biographers’ writings, my function as reader is to listen to two voices in conversation—the one that comes from the author, and the one that comes from the protagonist—that attempt to make sense of deeply traumatic experiences in the author’s life, for example, White’s relationship with her father. Not to do so would be doing a disservice to White and effectively silence her voice. What’s unique about White’s autobiographical novels, however, is that there are multiple voices at play, and by that I mean more than one alter ego. There is, at times, an alter ego within an alter ego, evidenced in Nanda’s heroine in *Frost in May*, who I will explore in more depth in Chapter Three, and the presence of her psychotic content in ‘The House of Clouds’ and *Beyond the Glass*, two texts that capture how elusive White’s sense of identity was. Nonetheless, this content also complicates the problematic construction of identity and authenticity of experience, which raises larger issues about how we should read retrospective autobiographical narratives by writers who suffered from mental illness following traumatic experiences.

**Memory and Identity**

In her recent essay on Dorothy Allison’s autobiographical novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, in which Ruth Anne’s sexual abuse by her stepfather, Glen, parallels Allison’s own experience of sexual abuse by her stepfather, Leigh Gilmore asks a very important question: ‘Where does autobiography end and fiction begin in an autobiographical novel?’ (45). With regard to trauma narratives in particular, a larger question is posed by Gilmore: ‘what is real and what is imagined in the representation of self and trauma’ (46). Writing with autobiographical elements creates a lot of obstacles, not just in terms of self-representation but how the reader should judge the success of the work and on what terms. For White, this is a difficult task, given her history of mental illness and psychotic episodes where her accuracy of account is subject to scrutiny. It is a tricky situation because the nature of autobiographical fiction is the literary counterpart to psychological trauma: it is a recreated narrative that will have many truths but also many distortions in it because that is also the nature of trauma and how one is able to respond consciously to it. Where the truth ends and the fiction begins depends on the severity of the trauma.

Lejeune observes that the problem of authenticity is knotted together with memory and identity. In his chapter ‘Autobiography in the Third Person’ in *On Autobiography* (1989), to demonstrate how autobiographers can be actors, too, Lejeune makes reference to an exercise that Bertolt Brecht required of his actors. Brecht would have them invert their roles from the first person to the third person and act from a retrospective perspective. The aim of this exercise was to ‘encourage distancing’ and help his actors ‘express their problems of identity and at the same time to captivate their readers’ (31). In a discussion on how to interpret the ‘I’ when an author refers to himself or herself in the third person, ‘the erasing of enunciation’ becomes ‘a fact of enunciation’ (32). In terms of autobiographical fiction, however, ‘utterance itself would be taken in the perspective of a phantasmatic pact (“this has meaning in relation to me, but is not I”)’ (32-33). This form invites what Lejeune calls ‘ambiguous reading’ (32) that can cause problems of identity for the reader (33). Coupled with Lejeune’s statement that autobiography proper is depicted in a retrospective narrative prose that tells the story of one’s life, particularly the story of one’s personality, I raise the following question: what does it mean to write about a fractured personality? How does the reader, in turn, interpret a fractured personality that makes its presence felt in an alter ego? In *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), Judith Herman makes a poignant observation that speaks to inherent barriers to authenticating traumatic narratives:

The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognised, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom. (1)

While there may be confused memories and, hence, problems of authenticating those memories, White’s autobiographical novels function as narratives that speak to this dialectic. On the one hand, as illustrated in Chapter One, although a connection between psychosis and sexual trauma cannot be proven conclusively, there is the possibility of real sexual trauma as a result of sexual abuse made secret within the confines of an Oedipal narrative. On the other hand, White’s autobiographical novels provide a testimony to White’s traumatic experiences. Writing in the third person functions to distance White to a certain extent from the authorial ‘I’ following deeply traumatic experiences that are difficult to address personally.

Infused in White’s writings is a preoccupation with death mingled with sexual angst. In a diary entry dated 7 July, 1949, White recalls experiencing a return of psychosis in the summer of 1948: ‘I am not sure when during this summer I had the severest of all crises, during which D. said she could do nothing but wait and warned the caretaker here that I might have an accident. I think I was in considerable danger during this summer. There were times when I really was not normal: I was in semi-cataleptic states’ (214). Just a month later on 4 August, 1949, White seems to get to the root of her psychological angst: ‘It really [is] time I grasped that my parents were dead and that I have no longer got to imitate them, defy them or obey them…. My father can’t judge me any more … That menacing eye literally does not exist any more and never will’ (216). However, a few years later in a diary entry dated 4 November, 1952, White recollects having a particularly disturbing and yet enlightening dream about her father:

On the night of All Saints, I had an extraordinary dream. / I saw a man like my father looking out of the window of a friend’s house. Then I went into the house and it was my father. We embraced with such love and relief. I was so happy to see him and I said so. Then I told him how for years I had dreamt he was not dead … I still could not realize that he had not died. I kept saying ‘But I saw you buried.’ He said that he had had the plague and that it was always done in such circumstances. The person was buried and then secretly exhumed … All he had to do was to give himself injections. By now I really was convinced. There was a young doctor with him, very modern … / … I was so happy, so relieved. I would not be lonely any more … I longed for us to get home here and be quiet together […] I began to wake up. As I did so, I was aware of a very faint sexual tremor. / The dream had been so vivid that it was the most terrible disappointment to find it was only a dream … yet the happiness of the dream … or rather a sense of peace, a sense that *something* … had changed persisted … I suppose it means I have truly ‘forgiven’ my father. (251-252; emphasis in original)

White never divulges what she needs to forgive her father for, but a few weeks later she writes, ‘Now that my dream seems to show that I really have forgiven and accepted my father, shouldn’t I consider the corollary that my father has forgiven me? What about the “suspect” elements in the dream? Fear … about my novels. Slightly wrong love … the sexual element. A touch obviously of wanting the father as a *husband*’ (253; emphasis in original). From a Freudian perspective, White’s dream marks a distortion of repressed memories into consciousness that informs the content of her autobiographical novels in relation to her father. It is a theory he describes in ‘Delusion and Dream in Jensen’s *Gradiva*’ (1907). This essay explores the main protagonist Norbert’s desires for a sculptural artifact, Gradiva, who unconsciously represents his repressed but anxiety-ridden desires for his childhood love, Zoë. This essay also marks the first detailed account of repressed memories and their distortion into consciousness in relation to the creative impulse.

With regard to the creative work, in particular, Freud explores the distinguishing features of manifest and latent content[[38]](#footnote-38) in dreams and how they connect to repressed sexual desires. He suggests that, due to an inherent feeling of guilt, the subject experiences anxiety: ‘The mark of something repressed is precisely that in spite of its intensity it is unable to enter consciousness’ (48). When phantasies do enter consciousness, it is as a result of the ego’s resistance to confront the experience associated with the memory that has been repressed. Freud points out that the phantasies, or ‘precursors of delusions … are substitutes for and derivatives of repressed memories which a resistance will not allow to enter consciousness unaltered, but which can purchase the possibility of becoming conscious by taking account, by means of changes and distortions, of the resistance’s censorship’ (58). I would like to stress that Freud's reference to psychosis in this instance is with regard to the manifestation of a delusion that makes its appearance in the creative work itself. Norbert’s desires for a sculptural artifact, Gradiva, is an unconscious manifestation of his repressed, anxiety-ridden desire for his childhood love Zoë, who, in turn, reflects Jensen’s own sublimated erotic desire for someone in his life that is expressed in the act of creating a literary product.

This idea is modified a year later in ‘Creative Writers and Daydreaming’ (1908). Freud adds that creative writers’ creations are not only products of fantasy but can be distinctly distinguished from reality and are now a substitute for their play in childhood (484). The difference between children at play and adults who fantasise, however, is that adults are ashamed of their fantasies and attempt to hide them. Most importantly, it is only unhappy persons who fantasize as a result of unsatisfied wishes. The fantasy itself is ‘the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality…. These wishes are either related to ambition (primarily related to younger men) and eroticism (primarily related to younger women). The more powerful the fantasy, the more likely is the onset of neurosis or psychosis … fantasies being the immediate mental precursors of … distressing symptoms’ (485). According to Freud, the ego, moreover, is divided between three time consortiums: the past, present, and future, in which the wish, analogous to the memory of an experience in childhood, ‘finds its fulfillment in the creative work’ (487). One cannot fail to notice that Freud’s modifications of wish-fulfilment are gender-biased. With Freud’s new insights, Jensen’s wishes are ambition-related in his unconscious pursuit of his love object as a successful aim in itself, whereas White’s wishes are attributed to her need to be desired by the love object. Both scenarios pertain to, I might add, what drives little boys and girls on their respective Oedipal journeys.

Freud asserts that because a creative writer feels ashamed of his innermost fantasies and feels we may become repulsed by them, he hides his fantasies in technique, in what Freud refers to as ‘ars poetica’ (153). Effectively, ‘the writer softens the character of his egoistic daydreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal―that is, aesthetic―yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his fantasies’ (153).[[39]](#footnote-39) In other words, readers can become seduced by the aesthetic nature of a work that conceals the artist’s true intentions, albeit unconscious ones, for the most part. Interestingly, at face value, there does appear to be a strong analogy between the creative work and White’s sublimation of erotic desires. In a diary entry dated 6 January, 1935, she writes, ‘The essences of situations one can only perceive in one’s own experience, but, having perceived them clearly, one can embody them in another form. “Truth” in fiction depends on this…. Possibly the first part should be entirely devoted to getting him. I am sick to death of E[irene] and her convent education. Let that rest. I want him. His life is finished: can be examined. I will not be afraid of him any more. It is a pure accident that we were father and child. I have a right to look at him, yes, sexually too’ (35). In a diary entry dated 12 May, 1941, she expresses her ambivalent feelings for her father in his death: ‘I think I could now talk to him without fear, even naturally and with pleasure. Yet even now I do very occasionally dream that he is alive and wake with fear. This dream is, I think, always connected with the fear of his discovering me in the sexual act’ (174).

**Psychosis and Agency of Alter Ego**

Whilst I applaud the connection that Freud makes between author and protagonist, the reader is led down a particular path of interpretation that reveals anxiety-ridden Oedipal desires. As illustrated, in Freudian terms, White’s Oedipal desires would be hidden behind a veneer of fear that symbolizes her anxiety. However, what if this fear, I ask, has real substance? When Clara declines into madness in *Beyond the Glass*, it is an episode that White claims to be an exact documentary of her experiences in an asylum. Jane Dunn makes the following observation that speaks to White’s need to examine her illness: ‘with the evidence of her Bethlem medical records, it is possible to appreciate just how brilliantly [White] maintained, within her fiction, an extraordinary connection to the literal truth. It was as if she was both in the belly of the beast and also detached, observing the processes of her madness and the treatment meted out to her from a distant perspective’ (80). In a diary entry dated 18 June, 1938, White recalls, ‘the most striking thing about madness, painful and terrifying as it was[,] was the sense of continued intensity of experience. I was often agonised, miserable and terrified, but I was never bored’ (136). White’s last thread of connection to the real world made way for the madness that both repelled and yet attracted her: ‘Once I was right in the power of the beast and it was terrible and wonderful’ (qtd. in Dunn 80).

In writing autobiographically, Dunn suggests that White attempts to make sense of her experiences, ‘sealed in her own pandemonium’ and ‘deemed a risk to herself and others’ (79). White had a profound impact on people in her life. David Gascoyne, for example, visited White after he returned from Spain in 1937 and found that ‘her suicidal tendency is so marked that she can’t take out an insurance policy on her life’ (qtd. in Chitty 94). Chitty herself also recalls White feeling suicidal after the publication of *The Sugar House* (166). These suicidal tendencies that pervade much of White’s life are dramatized in her psychotic content.

Echoing an earlier scene in ‘The House of Clouds’ in which Helen is visited by a priest and doctor, the first in anticipation of a possible death and the second in anticipation of a possible life,[[40]](#footnote-40) in *Beyond the Glass,* Clara’s thoughts become increasingly disorientated, and a father figure starts to prefigure strongly. One especially disturbing scene is when Clara revisits the appearance of her father in a monk’s habit, and this time, unlike in ‘The House of Clouds,’ it is clear to whom the protagonist is referring. Although Clara’s father is wearing a monk’s habit—not his regular attire—Clara is at first able to digest this perception without inquiry. She asks ‘Why are you here, Daddy?’ (203). When Claude responds, Clara does not recognise his voice nor his face, and she concludes that he is an evil spirit disguised as her father: ‘He was going to try to kiss her. If this devil kissed her, she was lost for ever. She would never see Richard again…. She whirled her arms and shrieked ‘Don’t touch me…. Don’t touch me…. I won’t marry you…. I belong to Richard’’ (203). On a conscious level—and after a near fatal ending to her life—Clara’s hallucinations can be seen initially as a safe haven as she wards off the prospect of spiritually and mentally dying. There is, seemingly, the real threat of her subsequently finding herself in the devil’s grasp.

Images of death are dominant features in White’s descriptions of psychosis. In ‘The House of Clouds’, Helen’s mind becomes foggy, and she soon descends deeper into an alternate reality where her dreams become reality. Perhaps months or years into the future, she oscillates between the loss and return of her identity as a human being. It is an experience she expresses with clarity:

For years she was not even a human being; she was a horse. Ridden almost to death, beaten till she fell, she lay at last on the straw in her stable and waited for death. They buried her as she lay on her side, with outstretched head and legs. A child came and sowed turquoises round the outline of her body in the ground, and she rose up again as a horse of magic with a golden mane, and galloped across the sky. Again she woke on the mattress in her cell. (52)

Helen’s perception of herself is unsettling. The metaphorical content described in the aforementioned passages convey a preoccupation with flight and death that corresponds to White’s suicidal tendencies during times of despair. And yet, in this particular description, death also seems romanticized in a glorious flight of gold and speed shattered by the mundane description of being awoken within a drab and confined space. Presented with a poignant demonstration of White’s suffering alter ego, she relives the same horrors from one text to another. In *Beyond the Glass*, Clara’s descent is fast and furious. She is at times a child, a horse, a mouse, a salmon, a flower, and occasionally she is a human being, although not an ordinary human being

but Lord of the World. Whatever she ordered came about. The walls of her prison turned to crystal. Beyond them was a garden full of larches and apple-trees, with peacocks strutting on the lawns. One of them had a blue jay’s feather in its beak. She turned that peacock into a beautiful young man and the others into children lovelier than dreams. Then she tested her powers by ordering destruction. She changed the garden into a sea and summoned up a storm that blew great ships out of their courses as if they were paper boats. Only herself she could not command. (215)

What is intriguing to me about White’s descriptive passages in her autobiographical fiction is that they combine both the visual and the text in which the tension between love and hate, recognition and non-recognition seem to be driving forces. However, if we were to analyse these dramatic descriptive passages purely based on the authenticity of recollection, we may meet with some resistance, particularly given the psychotic nature of the content. On a superficial level, readers are presented with a scenario in which White is writing about a traumatic experience in a language that is evidently poetic that serves to help her relate to her experience and, indeed, for readers to visualise her experience. Writing creatively, however, is an issue that Paul de Man, Lejeune, and from a psychoanalytic perspective, Jacques Lacan, address in relation to the unreliability of capturing a past experience.

In ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’ (1979), de Man suggests that writing autobiography is an impossible achievement because ‘the specular moment is not primarily a situation or event that can be located in history, but that it is the manifestation, on the level of a referent, of a linguistic structure’ (922). This linguistic structure, according to de Man, replaces lived experience as something belonging to the past that is now dead but has been revived in language through the mechanisms of prosopopeia, what de Man describes as ‘the trope of autobiography, by which one’s name … is made as intelligible and memorable as a face’ (926). For de Man, moreover,

As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding. Death is a misplaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause. (930)

Similarly, in an attempt to engage with his own autobiographical writing, Lejeune states that he can tolerate ‘indetermination’ but not ‘ambiguity’, which he illustrates with the *Triple Self-Portrait* by Norman Rockwell (134). The problem that concerns Lejeune is how Rockwell is able to paint a portrait that shows him painting a portrait of himself with his back to the audience. He describes this moment as a ‘pedagogical and humorous exercise on the theme of the self-portrait … the self-portrait and the “painter’s studio”. And what we see here is both exactly what the painter cannot see and what the onlooker of the self-portrait *imagines*’ (112; emphasis in original). Lejeune concludes that Rockwell’s self-portrait is only an impression because we see him seeing himself as artist and painter.

Indeed, ideas of perception are challenged on a literal level, and it is true that the viewer cannot secure the resemblance between the painter and his portrait, but this is also a problem with a concrete interpretation. Both de Man and Lejeune speak to an age-old Platonic view on mimesis and in so doing miss the point about self-representation on a deeper psychological level. Whether or not perception is a distortion of the truth as perceived by others, this should not negate the truth of perception as White perceives it. As in Rockwell’s self-portrait, White is asking the reader to go beyond the superficial gaze to how she perceives herself through a conversation between author and protagonist or alter ego through the language of psychosis, in which her experiences are translated into visual images. After all, memory itself is revived in our capturing images of the past, whether they are snapshots or scenes replayed in our minds. These are images that White attempts to capture in metaphorical language in her autobiographical fiction; this act, moreover, invites the reader to witness a recasting of White’s personality in her alter egos in an attempt to form some cohesion of identity against the backdrop of a psychotic traumatic experience. As Olney eloquently describes in *Metaphors of Self*, by focusing on emotional experiences, ‘Metaphor is essentially a way of knowing … through which we stamp our own image on the face of nature’ (31). The problem for literary thinkers and psychoanalysts alike, however, is to determine the image that is being stamped.

In ‘Screen Memories’ (1899), Freud addresses how a traumatic experience is commonly screened by a memory that appears inconsequential at the time the experience occurred:

Two psychical forces are concerned in bringing about memories of this sort. One of these forces takes the importance of the experience as a motive for seeking to remember it, while the other―a resistance―tries to prevent any such preference from being shown. These two opposing forces do not cancel each other out, nor does one of them (whether with or without loss to itself) overpower the other. Instead, a compromise is brought about, somewhat on the analogy of the resultant in a parallelogram of forces. And the compromise is this. What is recorded as a mnemic image is not the relevant experience itself―in this respect the resistance gets its way; what is recorded is another psychical element closely associated with the objectionable one…. The result of the conflict is therefore that, instead of the mnemic image which would have been justified by the original event, another is produced which has been to some degree associatively *displaced* from the former one…. the substituted memory will necessarily lack those important elements and will in consequence most probably strike us as trivial. (306-07)

Whilst Freud addresses the complex return of memory as a mnemic image, he does not go into great depth in relation to the language of psychosis, which is an area that Lacan articulates on Freud’s behalf in the language of linguistics to illustrate the unreliability of narrating psychosis.[[41]](#footnote-41) Addressing psychotic language in *The Psychoses 1955-1956: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III*, Lacan writes, ‘It’s classically said that in psychosis the unconscious is at the surface, conscious … the unconscious is a language[[42]](#footnote-42) [in Freudian terms]. Its being articulated doesn’t imply its recognition, though…. If it’s ever possible for someone to speak in a language that he is totally ignorant of, we can say that the psychotic subject is ignorant of the language he speaks. Is this a satisfactory metaphor? Certainly not’ (11-12). In Lacanian terms, the question is how a psychotic language that is essentially unconscious language finds its way into the real, appearing as it does in a distorted fashion. He goes on to pose an interesting question: ‘what is the connection in this discourse between the subject who speaks in these voices and the subject who reports these things to us as meaningful?’ (123).

According to Lacan, based on Freud’s ideas on misrecognition, psychotic language is by its very nature symptomatic of paranoia because it comprises delusions and hallucinations. Probably one of the most famous cases of paranoia[[43]](#footnote-43) is Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903) and his delusional belief that it was his duty to restore humanity to an Edenic state of existence, which could only be achieved by his transformation into a woman (8). In this new gender role, Schreber believes that the transcendental nature of his visions ‘cannot be expressed in human language; they exceed human understanding’ because he is closer to a divine understanding of God’s wishes for the world (16). The fact that he can only communicate in ‘images and similes’ supports Schreber’s belief in his privileged status as being closer than any other human being to ‘divine revelation’ (16).

Although White does not lay claim to a divine relationship with God, a similarity her text shares with Schreber’s is that they both provide detailed and fascinating descriptions of their delusions and hallucinations that are a grappling with physical and spiritual self-preservation against a human plot to destroy them in some way. For Schreber, specifically, the plot is to transform his male body into a female one for the purpose of ‘sexual misuse’ by a person assigned by Professor Flechsig (63). In order not to suffer this form of sexual degradation, his inner voices encourage him that ‘it was my duty to die of hunger and in this way to sacrifice myself to God’ (64).

Schreber’s descriptions are interesting in themselves, but a particularly striking feature is what he says about them in his role as omniscient author: ‘I am fully aware how fantastic all this must sound to other people; and I therefore do not go so far as to assert that all I have recounted was objective reality; I only relate the impressions retained as recollections in my memory’ (78). He goes on to recount certain hallucinations he had that seemed outside of his control:

I remember that during the night I frequently sat on the floor of my bedroom, clad only in a shirt … having left the bed following some inner impulse. My hands, which I set firmly on the floor behind my back, were perceptibly lifted up at times by bearlike shapes (black bears); other ‘black bears’, both greater and smaller, I saw sitting around me with glowing eyes. My bedclothes formed themselves into so-called ‘white bears’. (79)

And yet, Schreber also admits that he is able at times to will hallucinations into a parallel existence with his normal surroundings. The visualisation of objects, both animate and inanimate, is the essence of reproduction, where the real is placed side by side with the imaginary, even if what is real for Schreber is evidently still a delusion, as in his picturing to delude the rays.:

Another interesting phenomenon connected with the ray-communication―the real cause of compulsive thinking―is the so-called ‘picturing’.… Perhaps nobody but myself, not even science, knows that man retains all recollections in his memory, by virtue of lasting impressions on his nerves, as pictures in his head. Because my inner nervous system is illuminated by rays, these pictures can be voluntarily reproduced; this in fact is the nature of ‘picturing’.… I can for example let it rain or let lightning strike…. I can also let a house go up in smoke under the window of my flat, etc. All this naturally only in my imagination, but in a manner that the rays get the impression that these objects and phenomena really exist. I can also ‘picture’ myself in a different place, for instance while playing the piano I see myself at the same time standing in front of a mirror in the adjoining room in female attire; when I am lying in bed at night I can give myself and the rays the impression that my body has female breasts and a female sexual organ. (210-211)

According to Lacan in *The Psychoses 1955-1956: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III*, who examines the relationship between the symbolic and the real to figure out to whom the ego speaks inside the subject, he concludes that ‘the subject speaks to *himself with* his ego…. The moment the hallucination appears in the real, that is, accompanied by the sense of reality, which is the elementary phenomenon’s basic feature, the subject literally speaks with his ego, and it’s as if a third party, his lining, were speaking and commenting on his activity’ (14; emphasis in original). The overriding point that Lacan makes is that for the psychotic subject, like Schreber, the real is the Other[[44]](#footnote-44) that speaks for the part of the ego that has been split off or, ‘the unconscious is the discourse of the Other’ (112).

Lacan questions Schreber’s account of his delusions as one that is

incommunicable … the principle that in unconscious matters the relation of the subject to the symbolic is fundamental. This principle requires that we abandon the idea, implicit in many systems, that what the subject puts into words is an improper and always distorted enunciation of a lived experience that would be some irreducible reality…. There is, according to Blondel, something so original and irreducible in the lived experience of the delusional subject that when he expresses himself he gives us something that can only be misleading. All we can do is renounce any idea of ever penetrating this impenetrable lived experience. (118)

In other words, Lacan suggests that psychotic narratives lack a coherent transfer of metaphorical language from the unconscious to the conscious and, therefore, lived experience in the author’s intended form will not be understood by readers. I interpret this statement to mean that psychotic narratives lack value if coherent meaning cannot be generated from a lived psychotic experience. Using Judge Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903) to support his case, however, Lacan ignores Schreber’s attempts to grapple with sexual and spiritual preservation[[45]](#footnote-45) and suicidal tendencies through the agency of his alter egos; these are similarities he shares with White’s alter egos, Helen and Clara.

Like Schreber’s account, White’s metaphorical descriptions of her psychosis do speak to a tension between writing as both autobiographical authorial subject and alter ego, which problematises writing autobiographical fiction that is driven by memory. One could argue, as Robert Smith does, that ‘as soon as language becomes an issue … any last footing “the autobiographical subject” may have had gives way’ (qtd. in Anderson 14). However, it is the focus on the linguistic nature of language that also becomes highly restrictive through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens. The reader is left with the impression that the author is producing artificial constructs of personality and experience that have no bearing on reality. Similarly, from a literary perspective, when emotion is evoked within the structure of the poem that does not come from the artists themselves—particularly evident in formalist theory—what is left for the reader is essentially an artificial construct that has meaning but no depth in relation to an authentic experience. Any prospect of a referential authorial ‘I’ is eradicated as an illusion in place of a self-contained literary aesthetic that is analogous to looking at a pretty face and commenting on the external facial expressions it makes.

Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that a problematic self-representation of traumatic experiences through an alter ego, regardless of whether that testimony is written in the first or third person or from a conscious or unconscious perspective, is still a concern today, particularly if that testimony deviates from a plain language into a more creative metaphorical one. As Anne Cubilié recently observes,

‘Approaches to collecting, analysing, and performing testimony all rely on the “knowability,” if not transparency, of what is being said: plain language conveying “the truth” of horriﬁc experience is one of the authenticating aspects of testimonial in whatever form.’ When those witnessing to experiences of extremity and atrocity incorporate metaphorical language, or organize the narrative through ready-made plots of quest, conversion, or collective empowerment, or stage scenes in dialogue, or reflect too often on the process of composing the testimony itself, readers become ‘uncomfortable’ to the degree that ‘these literary devices seem to contravene and destabilize the authenticity of the bodily experience being recounted through the embodied vehicles of text and speech.’ Literary rhetoric, the craft of shaping a story, can make readers suspicious about the ‘authentic’ expression of pain. (qtd. in Smith and Watson 598)

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt also observes a similar problem in a recent review of Kathryn Harrison’s memoir, *The Kiss*. He wonders if ‘a memoir can ring too artistic for truth’ (qtd. in Eakin 153). In response to these statements, I ask: How does one describe pain in plain language, particularly when this pain is situated in a memory of a past event that may have become distorted in consciousness?

In ‘How Can I Speak of Madness? Narrative and Identity in Memoirs of ‘Mental Illness’’ (2004), Brendan Stone draws attention to the limitations and possibilities of reading madness in autobiographical narratives. He argues how one cannot recodify a narrative of chaos, i.e., madness into a ‘coherent plot’ because it is essentially unspeakable, which Schreber himself supports (49). According to Stone, the question that is the foundation upon which many questions rest is this: How unspeakable is trauma? If it is speakable, is it then only fiction? Furthermore, Stone asks the following questions: ‘If we do narrate the limit-experience, won’t this narration transform trauma into something which it was, and is, not – something governed by order, sense, reason, and progression? Would not such a narrative be a false story, a story which is dissonant with the self’s distress?’ (50). In answer to these questions, Stone sees the possibilities in narrating the self’s distress as a way to foster ‘an *openness* to the unforeseen, and … emergent and anarchic energies’ (52; emphasis in original). He refers to Slater’s work *Spasm* and the idea that ‘‘invention’ … can ‘get to the heart of things,’ while metaphor can gesture towards ‘the silence behind the story … through it we can propel silence into sound’’ (qtd. in Stone 53).

Stone makes an important observation that writing one’s distress dispenses with the need to reproduce faithfully an experience based on a rationalised depiction of truth to experience in a recognisable language because the act of writing is in itself a path towards ‘selfhood’ (54). In her article, ‘Strand by Strand: Untying the Knots of Mental and Physical Illness in the Correspondence and Diaries of Antonia White and Emily Holmes Coleman’ (2009), Sherah Wells suggests that through writing, White’s protagonist Clara can ‘reconstruct her subjectivity by (re)learning her identity and how to read and write. Her recovery [from psychosis] is indicated by her ability to write a letter to her father’ (46). In the example given here, the focus is on White’s ability to craft a subjective space in her writing that is projected onto her protagonist. However, for me, the situation is a bit more tenuous. For White, writing illustrates a struggle she has relating to her traumatic experiences that ultimately signifies a tension between aspiring to a selfhood described by Stone and being enveloped in a complex Oedipal narrative that evidences her ambivalent feelings for her father.   
 Writing autobiographically, White transforms her psychotic experiences from a purely external perception by others to a description of her inner psyche and the horrors of experience contained therein that provides a sense of self. For example, a sample medical record dated 20 March, 1923, states that ‘Patient is much more demented. She has regressed considerably. She has to be tube fed entirely now. She secretes enormous amounts of saliva. Does not speak at all now. Occasionally smiles in a dull sort of way. Stuporous condition. Mouth has much improved’ (qtd. in Dunn 82). The record describes what’s going on with White from a purely biological basis. In contrast, in *Beyond the Glass,* White’s poetic language takes the reader into an imaginary place beyond mere reportage of symptoms in White’s medical records. The following statements provide an interesting comparison between White’s diary entries and descriptions of psychosis in *Beyond the Glass*. On 6 May, 1935, White writes:

Bad nightmare last night. How cleverly the asylum nightmares keep up to date … This time I was an old woman, knowing I was mad, trying to plead with the nurses, explaining to them that things which looked quite normal and harmless to them were terrifying to me. They seemed to listen attentively, almost sympathetically, but in the end they giggled, behaved like nurses, and dragged me to the thing. The wire machine and the clippers … I had forgotten that strange [dream] months ago which ended (I was grown up) lying naked on the pavement, mad and knowing myself to be mad, yet peaceful and the little street boys looking at me and touching me, curious and rather frightened, saying ‘She’s a sleazy lady’ … (48)

Similarly, in *Beyond the Glass,* three old women appear before Clara and tell her, ‘You cannot sleep unless you die’ (215). Clara allows herself to be taken ‘to a beach and fettered … down on some stones, just under the bows of a huge ship that was about to be launched…. It passed, slowly, right over her body. She felt every bone crack; felt the intolerable weight on her shoulders, felt her skull split like a shell. But she could sleep now. She was free from the burden of having to will’ (215-216).

At face value, this metaphorical description is not literally true. In other words, White cannot authenticate it: A ship did not literally pass over White’s body. And yet, if one compares White’s diary entry with her poetic interpretation of it, what underpins these descriptions is White’s need to convey a traumatic experience in a manner that both best expresses her psychological state of mind and moves the reader. The image of a ship rolling over Clara’s body so that she might die releases White from life in a safe place where, paradoxically, she cannot be hurt – in a psychotic state. It is perhaps a majestic interpretation of her struggle with suicidal tendencies that are projected into her autobiographical fiction.

As illustrated in this section, the relationship between the authorial and narrative ‘I’ is a complex one. With regard to White’s autobiographical fiction, which has its limitations, i.e., the risk of ambiguity in the reader’s attempt to make sense of the author-protagonist relationship, making connections between the author’s representation of self through traumatic experiences seems to rupture in the very act of cohesion; this is due to the reader’s inability to fix an absolute linguistic meaning to the experience. White seeks to strike a balance between conveying a psychologically traumatic experience and doing so through literary aesthetic means.

Ever since White's father reprimands her for writing what he considered to be such a baleful novel—an experience reproduced in *Frost in May*—writing creatively has been a problem for White until after her father’s death. More significantly, White’s autobiographical fiction about a protagonist in crisis is a recasting of a fractured personality who offers testimony to a traumatic experience that had a profound impact on White’s personality and life. This testimony should be respected as a viable mode of self-expression that should not be subject to scrutiny that over-emphasises the problems of ambiguity, which pervade literary theories and criticism.

This chapter has been driven by three primary intertwining threads of inquiry with regard to White’s life and autobiographical fiction: 1) the relationship between author and protagonist; 2) questions of ambiguity and how to resolve these questions in metaphorical descriptions of psychotic episodes; and 3) how to gain some kind of agency within the confines of an Oedipal narrative. On the one hand, against the backdrop of literary rules and regulations about how to read and interpret genres like autobiographical fiction—a criticism that has its growth in twentieth century literary criticism and theories that seek to eradicate the notion, it seems, of ambiguity—the loss is felt perhaps most strongly by the reader. The reader’s ability to make a connection with writers like White, who are grappling with how to express creatively their traumatic experiences in the face of what they often perceive to be the threat of real mental, emotional, and spiritual annihilation, becomes severely restricted. Readers must embrace the ambiguous nature of psychotic narratives as evidence of both a safe haven in which some authors like White find themselves and as a place that is symptomatic of traumatic struggles with equally traumatic experiences in their histories.

**On the other hand, in context of Freud’s Oedipus complex theory, a neurotic’s descent into psychosis has no bearing on reality. In other words, a real mental illness derived from anxiety is connected to unfulfilled but unconscious incestuous sexual desires whose punishment is enforced by the stronger male super-ego. In White’s protagonist’s case, at least, punishment meted out by her father for her Oedipal desires does not have the desired social outcome. This is due, in part, to incongruous aspects of Freud’s understanding of where incestuous desires originate: the parent or the child. Either way, Freud’s derogatory views of women become evident in his perception of their desire for erotic attachments and an inability to exercise the super-ego without paternal direction.**

**Freud’s views on female sexuality align themselves with larger socio-cultural patriarchal attitudes about women as morally inferior to their male counterparts, which is particularly evident in some orthodox religions in the first half of the twentieth century, for example, Catholicism, which may also serve to explain White’s projection of spiritual angst in her psychotic descriptions. As a one-time lapsed Catholic herself, White would have felt this attitude most poignantly. Spiritual angst comes through most strongly in her autobiographical novel, *Frost in* May. Through a psychoanalytic lens, i**t is to White’s complex relationship negotiating her sexuality with her religion in this autobiographical novel that I turn my attention in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Paradoxical Notions of Sexual Expression in

*Frost in May*:A Story of Betrayal

*Catholic Pedagogical Practices – Maternal Devouring – Sexual Transgression, Confession, and a Transformation of Desire*

**Up until this point, I have covered two main areas. In Chapter One I addressed a problematic Oedipal drama in White’s autobiographical fiction that forms an interesting parallel with her history. The focus in that chapter was primarily on reading White’s autobiographical fiction through the most recognised feature of Freud’s Oedipus complex theory, i.e., an Oedipal trajectory driven by penis envy; however, the Oedipus complex was not resolved, which led to White’s flight into psychosis. An analysis of conflicting psychoanalytic interpretations of sexual trauma in relation to psychosis placed a spotlight on complexities associated with validating sexual abuse in White’s history. Given the genre in which White wrote, autobiographical fiction, in Chapter Two I addressed the knotted areas of authenticity, memory, and identity, with a focus on the problematic relationship between author and protagonist and to what extent meaningful value can be drawn from reading White’s account of her psychosis as a viable form of self-expression associated with any lived traumatic experience.**

**Strongly evidenced in White’s autobiographical fiction is how her protagonist’s a**spirations towards selfhood are undercut by a pervasive Freudian Oedipal narrative, which is indicative of White’s psychological angst in relation to her identity as a sexual woman and as a writer. **In a development of these points, this chapter is divided into three sections in consideration of how larger socio-cultural forces impacted White’s perception of herself as a sexual woman, most poignantly demonstrated in her autobiographical novel, *Frost in May*.**

**The** first section of this chapter explores the role of Roman Catholicism in White’s life and literature. Lippington’s spiritual practices serve to instill love and fear of God into Nanda, which is analogous to the relationship that her father Cecil Botting also cultivates. At the root of Lippington’s pedagogical practices is a specific Christian paradigm that subjects Nanda to unpalatable processes of self-regulation and self-sacrifice as a soldier of Christ that serve to establish a male authority in her life. I address White’s main protagonist Nanda’s relationship with her father and the nuns at Lippington—authoritative figures who manufacture Nanda, on a symbolic level, according to a higher moral imperative—to illustrate parallels between key Catholic tenets on sexuality and Freud’s Oedipus complex theory.

On a deeper symbolic level in pre-Oedipal terms, which will be the focus of the second section, the nuns function as Nanda’s replacement love objects who create anxiety for her as she navigates resentful feelings for a mother who is often absent in her life and by whom she feels betrayed as a result of this neglect. In an examination of interconnecting motifs of food and maternity, I highlight Nanda’s consumption of food at the convent as an all-consuming process of symbolic maternal devouring. **Freud admits in ‘Femininity’ (1933) that he did not give due credit to the mother-daughter relationship until late in his career, at which time his focus was to** demonstrate the strongest symptoms of sexual trauma in that relationship.

Similar to Eve’s transgression against God for her corrupt sexuality, Nanda writes a novel with salacious content that is perceived by her father and the nuns as an act of spiritual betrayal. Nanda is subsequently punished and cast out of her Garden of Eden. Whilst the discovery of her novel is a traumatic event for Nanda, in the third section of this chapter, I propose that it is no accident that it remains unfinished in *Frost in May* because it mirrors White’s assertion of the right to express herself sexually and autonomously in her writing. *Frost in May* was published in 1933 at the height of modernism. On the one hand, by writing sex into *Frost in May*, White seemingly pushes the limits of accepted religious axioms and the privileged status of the intellect in a culture in which sexuality is under scrutiny. On the other hand, from a Freudian perspective, writing the novel serves to push Nanda into the Oedipus complex proper.

Given this scenario, a question that arises for me, which I address in this section, is how can readers navigate reading an autobiographical novel like *Frost in May* that seems to testify to and yet testify against, paradoxically, the suppression of female sexuality?[[46]](#footnote-46) There is a tension between White’s modernist aspirations to revisualise herself sexually in her autobiographical fiction and her need to fit into the Catholic religious culture. This brings her sense of self into creative and psychological conflict. This conflict, as will be illustrated in the third section, is exacerbated by an underlying Oedipal narrative that makes its presence felt in paternal seduction. Writing autobiographically, White draws her father Cecil Botting as a man who fostered his daughter’s fears of damnation because of guilt in relation to his own corrupt sexuality and fears of damnation, which are projected onto White’s protagonist. I shall argue, through Nanda’s moral development, that White’s sexuality is inscribed within the parameters of both Catholic and psychoanalytic patriarchal discourses through mechanisms of condemnation and confession towards the transformation of desire. In other words, Nanda’s confession of perverse sexual phantasies is a vehicle for White to learn valuable moral lessons.

**Catholic Pedagogical Practices**

White’s introduction to Catholicism began at age seven. Under her father’s jurisdiction, who converted from the Church of England[[47]](#footnote-47) to Catholicism, and between ages nine and fifteen (1908-1914)[[48]](#footnote-48) was educated at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Roehampton, Surrey as a full boarder. In the year that *Frost in May* is published, White’s feelings about religion are weighing heavily on her mind. Shortly after her first novel’s publication, she writes in a diary entry dated 10 September, 1933, ‘I feel “if only”… if only I could make up my mind once and for all about religion’ (24). White readdresses this thought in a list of likes, hates, and wants in a diary entry dated 30 December, 1934, under the heading ‘What I would like to happen’: ‘To be clear once and for all of the Catholic Church’ (33). In *Frost in May*, White’s mixed feelings towards Catholicism are depicted in the fictional counterpart to the Sacred Heart, The Convent of the Five Wounds in Lippington.

As Nanda and her father approach Lippington’s front door on her first day, they ‘waited several minutes before the flap behind the grill blinked up and down. After much rattling of chains and bolts the door was opened’ (White 16). Nanda observes the ‘stretch of white-washed walls and red-tiled floor’ that complement the statue of Our Lord at the end of the corridor dressed in ‘white robes wearing a red, thorn-circled heart on his breast like an order’ (16). The vision of this corridor is one that strikes Nanda as ‘bare’ and ‘clean’ (16). This setting foreshadows Nanda’s doubts about the spiritual landscape of Catholic culture. On the one hand, the corridor is symbolically sterile and confining and yet, on the other hand, it alludes to the sacrificial blood of Christ and the colors of the Crusaders.

Nanda is quickly introduced to Catholic pedagogy. *Outline of Catholic Pedagogy* (1915), a textbook written by Michael J. Lochemes for the instruction of Catholic students and teachers, offers insight into Catholic pedagogy in the early decades of the twentieth century. The fundamental principles of a true education include the doctrines of ‘(1) The origin and nature of man, (2) The end and purpose of his existence, (3) Man’s original condition, and (4) Man’s fall and its consequences’ (4). I propose that *Frost in May* follows this pedagogical trajectory with a particular focus on (4), corresponding to Nanda’s experiences at Lippington, including her fateful transgression that leads to her dismissal.

At first, Nanda is a congenial student who stays close to the Catholic tenet that ‘whatever man does in this life must be done with a view to his life hereafter. A deep sense of duty must guide him in all his actions’ (Lochemes 8). Nanda finds that ‘being good was surprisingly easy; there seemed so little time to be anything else’ (White 48). Indeed, for being ‘Very Good’ Nanda receives a ‘pale blue card’ and anticipates securing the enviable ‘pink ribbon’ that brings with it special privileges. However, Nanda observes one nun, Mother Frances, who seems to be watching her very closely. Nanda suspects that the nun’s intention is to remove her exemption, which encourages Nanda to behave ‘more exasperatingly well’ (48). Despite Nanda’s exemplary performance of virtue, Mother Frances finds fault: ‘You’re obstinate, you’re independent … spiritual pride is your ruling vice. One of these days, if you’re not careful, you’ll be setting up your own conceited little judgment against the wisdom of the Church, which is the wisdom of God himself’ (49). These words would have had an emotional impact on Nanda a few weeks earlier, but they are suppressed as Nanda bites her lip and finds that she ‘was growing a hard little protective shell’ (49). Thus, in the very course of Nanda’s stubbornness, she simultaneously defies Catholic pedagogy and acknowledges the acute observation made by Mother Frances.   
 Nanda does not feel the calmness she emits on the surface. Nanda is also on her best behavior at the beginning of her stay at Lippington to impress her father, Mr. Grey, who ‘had always demanded a high standard of quietness and obedience’ (50). Nanda is no stranger to behaving in a manner that pleases her father, and yet he also encourages her to develop her intellectual qualities: ‘No one could trip Nanda up on the difference between Corinthian and Ionic columns. Mr. Grey had taught her to distinguish between these on her first visit, at the age of five, to the British Museum’ (29). Mirroring White’s experiences, Jane Dunn remarks in *Antonia White: A Life* (2000) that, for Cecil Botting, joining the Catholic Church was like joining an intellectual elitist spiritual establishment because it showed just how clever he was (37). Mr. Botting, like his alter ego, Mr. Grey, vicariously projects this intellectualism on to his daughter. In her epistolary text, *The Hound and the Falcon* (1983), White recalls that her father, fervently non-religious prior to his own conversion, ‘was so intellectually and morally convinced that he would have made any sacrifice rather than not follow his light … convinced … that the Catholic claims were unanswerable’ (153). In the same text, White describes her father as ‘a devout, but rigoristic man with no understanding of people unlike himself. He centred everything on me, trying to force me into an exact replica of himself. I adored him, feared him and was never at ease with him. Remember this in my exaggerated fear of “loving” authority’ (82).

On a superficial level, in *Frost in May,* Mother Frances appears to respect Mr. Grey’s wishes that Lippington incorporate his intellectual requests, and she is acutely aware of Nanda’s intellectual prowess. However, Mother Frances’s agenda is that Mr. Grey’s requests should serve to humiliate Nanda and, to a certain degree, her parents, too, as new converts. Moreover, Mother Frances seems intent on providing Nanda with a Catholic education that also seems to double as a means to an end via punishment. In order to humiliate Nanda, and thus educate her on the nature of humility, Mother Frances does not hesitate to take full advantage of a situation she considers to be unconducive to Lippington’s spiritual practices. For example, when a schoolmate of Nanda’s, Mildred, is selected to take charge of Nanda, Mildred’s unhappiness at the prospect is shown in her ‘wriggling’. Mother Frances reminds Mildred that such behaviour is unacceptable and proceeds to reflect upon the type of school that teaches dramatic ‘reeling and writhing and fainting in coils’ (23). When asked by Mother Frances to what book this scene alludes, Nanda is quick to reply, ‘*Alice in Wonderland*’ (24). A scene that brings to mind images of Lewis Carroll’s conger-eel[[49]](#footnote-49) in the mock-turtle’s story, Nanda perceives this answer as her ‘first triumph’, but it is spoilt by Mother Frances’s enforcement of an earlier wake-up time for Mildred because ‘Nanda’s father wants [Nanda] to have a cold bath every morning. So she’ll have to be up a quarter of an hour before the others’ (24). Ironically, Mr. Grey’s infiltration of Lippington’s practices with borderline Draconian rituals betray Mother Frances’s own vision of what being a Catholic convert entails, thus making Mr. Grey a rather suitable example of a successful Catholic convert.

At the root of the nuns’ rigid spiritual practices is a specific Christian paradigm, which is evident in methods commonly employed in convents in the first half of the twentieth century. The girls are at war according to a higher moral imperative: They are manufactured to become ‘soldiers of Christ, accustomed to hardship and ridicule and ingratitude,’ as Mother Radcliffe states (118). Part of the girls’ indoctrination is to subject themselves to unpalatable processes of self-regulation and self-sacrifice. For example, as a soldier of Christ, Nanda needs to sleep on her back with her arms crossed over her chest in case she should be called upon in her sleep. An anonymous nun in black glasses who emerges from the shadows reminds Nanda that ‘If the dear Lord were to call you to Himself during the night, you would be ready to meet Him as a Catholic should’ (35). Later, Father Parry, on one of his ceremonial visits, tells the girls, ‘Ever since the day of your birth you have been dying; every hour of play or study brings you a little nearer to the end of your life. A good Catholic should live constantly in the spiritual presence of death’ (100). Father Parry goes on to encourage the girls to imagine themselves on their death beds in the throes of agony with devils and angels fighting for their souls, the corrosion of their bodies and the judgement of God upon their souls (101). Nanda retires to bed that night ‘to dream that Theresa Leighton was lying dead in Our Lady’s Chapel, wearing her first Communion dress and a gilt paper crown. As she looked at her, a worm came out of Theresa’s mouth and Nanda woke up shrieking’ (101).

Lippington’s spiritual practices become increasingly stressful for Nanda, exacerbated by her attempts to navigate what she perceives to be growing injustices to which she is subjected, even though she initially refuses to let this show. Instead, she concentrates on the sufferings of the Venerable Margaret Clitherow in the sixteenth century, who faces torture for treason against Queen Elizabeth I for converting to Catholicism and hiding Catholic priests in her house: ‘“As she lay on the scaffold,” she read stubbornly, “with a smile of heavenly patience on her face, the executioners lowered an heavy oaken door on to her prostrate form. On this door they piled a mass of great weights, and, to cause her still more exquisite torment, they” … but the rest of the passage was obscured by a fog of tears’ (44). In actuality, this embellished description provided by White is not found in *Lives of the English Martyrs* by Edwin Hubert Burton and John Hungerford Pollen (1914); nonetheless, an interesting comparison can be drawn between Margaret Clitherow’s experiences and Nanda’s growing anxiety and sense of injustice with regard to Lippington’s spiritual methods as a recent convert to Catholicism.

According to Burton and Pollen’s account in *Lives of the English Martyrs*, the Venerable Margaret Clitherow ‘so gladly suffered loss and death, in order to help in keeping the faith alive in England…. Can we doubt that her sufferings and death have won for her prayers a “power and passion to deliver hearts from the prison-house” of heresy?’ (Burton and Pollen 188). When Margaret learns of the Catholic faith in 1574,[[50]](#footnote-50) she decides that its doctrine of the ‘Christian duty in truth and sincerity’ is more inspiring than ‘to serve the world vainly’ in the Protestant church (189). Consequent to her change in faith and the desire to attend the Catholic Church, it is brought to the attention of a prior ecclesiastical parish that Margaret has not been attending. Indeed, Margaret is at the time already in prison for heresy, heavy with child (190). When she is released, she engages in Clandestine Catholic operations, visits the graves of previous York martyrs for the cause who had been executed in 1582, and welcomes living priests to her house. Soon, Puritan[[51]](#footnote-51) Elizabethan penal laws against Catholic priests and those who support them become ‘more strictly enforced’ (193). However, Margaret is prepared to go to the gallows for her faith. Continually under surveillance, she is eventually found to be hiding a Catholic priest and is imprisoned on 10 March, 1586. She is judged on the 14th and 15th of the same month. Margaret refuses to plead guilty against an offence to the Queen. A Protestant preacher, Wigginton, ‘solemnly warned him that he ought not ‘either by God’s laws or man’s, to judge her to die upon the slender witness of a boy’ (195). So, the judge proclaims that Margaret should undergo the following judgment:

You must return from whence you came, and there in the lowest part of the prison, be stripped naked, laid down, your back upon the ground, and as much weight laid on you as you are able to bear, and so continue three days without meat or drink, except a little barley bread and puddle water, and the third day be pressed to death, your hands and feet bound to posts, and a sharp stone under your back. (195-196)

When Margaret lays upon the ground,

the door was laid upon her and her hands were tied to two posts. After a few more   
questions answered by the martyr with meek firmness, weights were laid upon the   
door, and after fifteen minutes of intense agony her soul passed ‘with marvellous   
triumph into the peaceable city of God, there to receive a worthy crown of endless   
immortality and joy’. The last words she was heard to speak were: ‘Jesu! Jesu!   
Jesu! have mercy on me!’ (198)

Similar to Margaret’s physical and spiritual plight, Nanda perceives herself in the arms of an unjust law, made more painful because she, like Margaret, is a convert who yearns to be received into the arms of God. Nanda particularly relates to the weight of the oaken door being placed on Margaret because, in the very religion for which Margaret is martyring herself, a huge weight also lies on Nanda’s soul. Nanda is not able to reach the end of Saint Clitherow’s sufferings as she is overcome by emotion; tears spring to her eyes that cloud her vision and prohibit her from rejoicing in the saint’s ‘triumph’ in death as she anticipates entrance into the city of God. Unlike Margaret, though, Nanda has doubts as to whether she is worthy enough to be admitted into God’s arms. These doubts, as I will illustrate momentarily, soon become a self-fulfilling prophecy in her identification with Eve as being responsible for the fall of man.

**Maternal Devouring**

Just as Eve first eats the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which thus unleashes feelings of love and hate, this scene translates into a Freudian interpretation of Nanda’s situation in relation to the mother-daughter relationship in the pre-Oedipal phase of the Oedipus complex. Permeating through *Frost in May* is a complex sadomasochistic (pre)Oedipal structure that fuses opposing instincts of life and death on one level and love and hate on another in the child’s relationship with its mother**. This is first evidenced in i**nterconnecting motifs of food and maternity. On the one hand, these motifs highlight Nanda’s consumption of food at the convent as an all-consuming process of symbolic maternal devouring. On the other hand, food becomes an indicator of Nanda’s growing sense of injustice in her witnessing of acts of hypocrisy at Lippington.

Catholic teachings at Lippington that focus on a combination of physical and psychical suffering serve to instill both fear and love for God into Nanda. As Margaret is only allowed ‘barley bread and puddle water’ prior to meeting God, food is an essential feature of Nanda’s Catholic indoctrination towards higher moral ideals and her own preparation for meeting God. Nanda is often served unpalatable meals. Her first meal ‘consisted of stewed meat and rice, cabbage drowned in vinegar, and sweet tea, already mixed with milk’ (White 27). Nanda feels ‘sickened’ at what is set before her but soon learns that not consuming this unappetizing meal could lead to mortal sin. Nanda knows that three things lead to mortal sin: ‘grave matter, full knowledge, and full consent’ (77). Thus, in order to be accepted into Lippington as a true Catholic, Nanda endeavors to be extra scrupulous. This includes the mortification of her sensory pleasures as a demonstration of her piety, for example, by taking second helpings of ‘particularly nasty cabbage’ and dowsing her rhubarb with salt; these are actions that are looked upon approvingly by the nuns (79).

From a Freudian perspective, the lack of nourishing food provided by the nuns suggests the presence of the ego-ideal and Nanda’s super-ego. (The ego-ideal is the ideal nature to which the subject is to conform upon emergence out of the Oedipus complex. Nanda’s super-ego functions to internalise the ego-ideal.) As Freud explains in ‘The Dissection of the Psychical Personality’ (1933), the ego-ideal, i.e., ‘educators, teachers [and] people chosen as ideal models’ take the parents’ place, and their expectations for continued moral behaviour—established by the subjects’ imagos[[52]](#footnote-52) in the earlier narcissistic phase of pre-Oedipal relations—are internalised by the subject (80). What is revealed in Nanda’s consumption of food, from a Freudian perspective, are deeper pre-Oedipal issues analogous to the act of alleviating anxiety. In other words, Nanda’s consumption of food at the convent revives earlier sexual anxieties in relation to her first love object, her mother. It is a problematic position that sets up the mother, like Eve, as a daughter’s awakening to carnal sin and love and hate through the consumption of food. Recognised as the dominance of the id (instinctual drives) in Freudian terms, the aim is for the little girl to become fearful of her biological mother and recognise her mother’s weakness as representative of the id and thus the inferior of the two sexes; this enables an easier turn to a stronger male authority who will function as the ego-ideal. In Nanda’s case, the nuns functioning as the ego-ideal epitomise their subservience to a higher male authority, God.

In ‘Female Sexuality’ (1931), Freud states that the first sexual contact the little girl has is with the mother’s breast. He finds that ‘the very surprising sexual activity of little girls in relation to their mother is manifested chronologically in oral, sadistic, and finally even in phallic trends directed towards her’ out of fear of being destroyed by her (Freud 237). At face value, two observations can be made: 1) the breast represents a source of nourishment for the little girl that can also become threatening; and 2) the breast is a point of sexual contact that arouses sexual excitation but is also a natural but difficult part of the little girl’s psycho-sexual development. As broached in Chapter One, what pushes a little girl into the arms of her father, in contrast to a little boy’s psycho-sexual development, are feelings of hatred for her mother. These feelings give rise to feelings of guilt, which is the precursor for the development of the super-ego. Nonetheless, a persistent sense of anxiety is present as the little girl tries to accommodate contradictory feelings that are simultaneously at play. As Freud later asserts in relation to the female condition in ‘Femininity’ (1933), ‘the fear of being poisoned is also probably connected with the withdrawal of the breast. Poison is nourishment that makes one ill’ (152).

Freud presents an interesting theory that revolves around a paradoxical situation to move the little girl out of traumatic pre-Oedipal relations into another equally traumatic situation in the Oedipus complex proper in which her incestuous sexual aims for the father are thwarted. Freud makes it clear that the mother is the child’s original seducer, thus causing sexual trauma. Stated more plainly, in a Freudian reading, it may have been knowledge of this seduction, coupled with penis envy, which fuels feelings of deep resentment in Nanda. According to Freud, at the heart of a little girl’s anxiety and resentment is her fear of being forsaken by her mother because the little girl has attempted to rob her mother of what will enable her to take her mother’s place and possess the much-desired penis. This situation leads to paranoia because, coupled with attachment problems in the oral phase, the girl feels, unconsciously, that she will be ‘devoured’ by her mother (186). For Nanda in *Frost in May—*mirroring White’s situation—her pre-Oedipal relations with her biological mother are intrinsically connected to her symbolic relationship with her replacement mother figure in the guise of the nuns. In the process of consuming the nuns’ food, Nanda’s sadistic impulses resurface and are essentially introjected[[53]](#footnote-53) as an act of masochistic self-punishment, due to unconscious guilt associated with her desire to rob her mother of the much-desired penis that then led to fears of being devoured by the primary love object, the mother.

In ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ (1924), Freud observes that ‘if pain and unpleasure can be not simply warnings but actually aims, the pleasure principle is paralysed—it is as though the watchman over our mental life were put out of action by a drug’ (159). In other words, a problem arises if two instincts, the one for life (libido) and the one for death (destructive) act as opposing forces, constituting a fusion of sadomasochism in the destructive instinct’s ‘will to power’, which drives a person’s unconscious desires (163). For example, Freud writes, ‘The [masochistic] wish to be beaten by the father comes from the sadistic-anal phase’ that follows ‘the fear of being eaten up by the totem animal (the father)’ (165). Despite Freud’s focus on the little girl’s desire to give her father a child, he purports in an earlier work, ‘Female Sexuality’ (1931), a stronger pre-Oedipal connection that girls have to their mothers than had previously been assumed. After reiterating his earlier position of a child’s attachment to the opposite sex in the throes of the Oedipus complex (184), he also states that ‘analysis has shown that where the attachment to the father was peculiarly strong it had been preceded by a phase of equally strong and passionate attachment exclusively to the mother…. A woman may remain arrested at the original mother-attachment and never properly achieve the proper change-over to men’ (185). This view is modified in ‘Femininity’ (1933): The girl’s first fear is being eaten up by her mother, who is then replaced by a more powerful authority, the father.

Earlier, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud developed a hypothesis that the ego, or the ‘I’, is situated between two opposing forces, which, although with different aims, serve the same function: to obtain mastery over the ego. The id, representative of what Freud terms the ‘pleasure principle’, i.e., the instincts that demand immediate gratification pertaining to food and libido, and which seek to avoid pain or displeasure, attempt to engineer the primitive aspects of the ego and ignore any external restraints put upon it. Acting as a moral prohibitor, the super-ego is an internalised conscience that is modeled on the subject’s ego-ideal that attempts to live up to the external moral restraints imposed on it on the basis of the production of morals stemming from an unconscious sense of guilt that becomes manifest in the ego: ‘The normal, conscious sense of guilt (conscience) … [is] based on the tension between the ideal ego and the ego-ideal and is the expression of a condemnation of the ego by its critical agency’ (50-51). If the ideal ego fails to live up to its ego-ideal, neurosis can ensue. As I will describe, the weaning process symbolically carried out by the nuns may be unconsciously interpreted as an act of persecution by Nanda—irrationally so from a Freudian perspective—that leads to neurosis.

One particularly interesting aspect about the onset of neurosis attached to the ego’s failure to live up to its ego-ideal as described by Freud is its connection with anxiety. As illustrated in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926), the function of the id is in its primitive drive to, for example, avoid pain, which will occur in relation to the loss of an object. However, according to Freud, this is something very different from the experience of anxiety: ‘Pain is … the actual reaction to loss of object, while anxiety is the reaction to the danger which that loss entails and, by a further displacement, a reaction to the danger of the loss of object itself’ (107), initiated by the ego as ‘loss of perception of the object’ (106). Freud distinguishes between a real anxiety when a person is faced with a known danger and neurotic anxiety when a person is faced with an unknown danger (100). However, both these types of anxiety are directed from an axis point deriving from fear connected with a danger of losing an object, for example, having a stranger, like the nuns, replace the mother (105).

Freud places much emphasis on the necessary antagonistic role of the breast as a contributing factor to a child’s sexual trauma and developing anxiety. His emphasis on the literal breast as a child’s first point of intimate contact with the mother, however, instead of being emblematic of the feeding relationship with the mother, accentuates his need to place the mother as the source of sexual arousal in the child in the auto-erotic phase of her psycho-sexual development. However, he also confesses to not evaluating the mother-daughter relationship beyond that. In ‘Female Sexuality’ (1933), Freud observes how, ‘Our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus, phase in girls comes to us as a surprise, like the discovery, in another field, of the Minoan-Mycenean civilization behind the civilization of Greece’ (226). While he finds that the little girl is dominated by aggressive oral and sadistic impulses directed at her mother out of fear of being killed by her (237), but he then reverts to his earlier theories in relation to castration, penis envy, and real sexual arousal.

**Sexual Transgression, Confession, and a Transformation of Desire**

The combination of religious and paternal restraints imposed upon Nanda lead her to revisualise herself in the production of a novel.[[54]](#footnote-54) On a superficial level, her motivation for creating the novel corresponds to a young girl’s efforts to transform her characters’ desires from Wildean hedonists to Catholic spiritual beings. The characters are certainly provocative. Nanda depicts a heroine with ‘geranium red lips and hair of finest spun gold and huge limpid violet eyes … and a “tiny tip-tilted nose”’ (201). Interestingly, Nanda’s physiognomy is not given in *Frost in May* but this rather feminine image bears a striking resemblance to White’s own, which further suggests that Nanda’s heroine is modelled on White herself. Besides a giddy and frivolous time spent at balls flirting with admirers, Nanda’s heroine has an ambivalent attraction to the hero; she is both repulsed by and attracted to an ugly character with ‘penetrating eyes’ who practices black magic, writes poetry, takes drugs, and wears elaborate silk dressing gowns (202). The hero is destined to end up in a Trappist monastery, but prior to Nanda writing in this momentous event, the novel is discovered by the nuns and Nanda is expelled.

**A heroine receiving ‘a kiss of burning passion on her scarlet mouth’ in the arms of an admirer during a waltz is hardly wicked enough to warrant such responses from Nanda's father and the nuns, but this episode marks a turning point in Nanda's life. Her relationships with her father, with God, and also with her own sense of identity were never to be the same again. Nanda's parents are called in on her fifteenth birthday and the contents of the novel are revealed to her father, prompting his disgust with a declaration of regret that Nanda had not been born a boy: ‘if a young girl's mind is such a sink of filth and impurity, I wish to God that I had never had a daughter’ (216). Just like White was unable to do nineteen years earlier, Nanda is not given the opportunity to explain that her novel is unfinished, and that her objective is to ‘make her characters as wicked as possible in order that their conversion might be the more spectacular’ (202). Perhaps in anger at Nanda for ignoring a basic Catholic tenet in which ‘even the heathens admit that perfect happiness cannot be attained by the enjoyment of earthly things’, her father no longer wants her to call him ‘daddy’ (Lochemes 8). In this one agonising moment, Nanda is rejected by the person she both fears and idealises more than anyone else. The nuns inform her a short while after this traumatic scene that they have noticed a ‘hard little core of self-will and self-love ... that needs to be broken completely and re-set before it can be at one with God's will’ (219).**

In an exploration of White’s relationship with the nuns at Lippington, Julietta Benson suggests in ‘“Varieties of “Dis-Belief”: Antonia White and the Discourses of Faith and Scepticism’ (1993) that ‘Lippington discipline … inspires an affectionate loyalty whilst at the same time it establishes a value structure, conferring meaning upon individual acts of obedience and disobedience’ (287). Indeed, this may be one explanation in support of the convent’s perspective, which is, I add, further supported by the doctrine of ‘The End and Purpose of Man’s Existence’ in Catholic pedagogy to serve God and ensure man’s ‘salvation and happiness’ in that life hereafter (Lochemes 8). However, from a psychological perspective, Nanda’s creation of the novel mirrors White’s experiences at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, where White’s own partially completed novel is discovered by the nuns and perceived by her father as an act of spiritual treachery against the Catholic Church. A close analogy would be that similar to Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden for their transgressions against God with the daunting prospect of eternal damnation,[[55]](#footnote-55) Nanda’s expulsion is an example that reinforces what the nuns are taught in Catholic instruction: ‘the pupil is not an ideal man, but ignorant, inclined to evil, morally weak, and filled with low desires’ (9).

Given that Nanda’s act of sexual transgression that is projected into her heroine mirrors White’s transgression, White may have been familiar with how this event would be interpreted by the nuns. In Catholic pedagogy, it is clear to whom the blame is attached in terms of sexual transgression specifically, although redemption is possible in successful childbearing should she amend her ways; as expressed in *The Holy Bible*, ‘Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach,[[56]](#footnote-56) nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed; then Eve. And Adam was not seduced; but the woman being seduced, was in the transgression. Yet she shall be saved through childbearing; if she continue in faith, and love, and sanctification, with sobriety’ (‘Douay-Rheims Bible’, 1 Timothy 2:11-14). Interestingly, similar to Freud’s premise that underlies his Oedipus complex theory, Catholic doctrine also recognises that as a result of original sin, a child’s moral powers are not yet developed, acknowledging that rewards and punishments are necessary, particularly in childhood ‘when sensual nature predominates’ (Lochemes 33).

Through a Freudian lens, the scene involving Nanda’s flirtations with her admirers corresponds to an unconscious representation of what necessitates Nanda’s passage into and through the Oedipus complex: she sexually pines after her father ‒ a pining that is displaced onto God by a devout woman ‒ in an unconscious effort to recover the lost penis that has been taken away by her mother (the nuns). This Oedipal fantasy scene is pushed through normalising processes via punishment from the internalised super-ego; after all, Nanda is reprimanded for her treacherous act of writing such sexually degrading material.

In *The Sugar House*, White was to revisit this traumatic episode in her life: ‘The nuns had confiscated the beginning of a novel she had been writing in secret. They had given her no chance to explain that she had made her characters behave as badly as possible in those opening chapters because she meant to convert them all sensationally in the last. Without telling her, they had sent the manuscript to her father and even threatened to expel her’ (162). His face ‘was so thunderous that she had stopped dead; her knees trembling so much that she could not take another step…. The things he had said to her that day had been so terrible that there was a blank in her mind about the end of the interview…. Neither of them had ever mentioned it since’ (162). As Freud states in relation to the little girl, which can equally apply to Nanda, she is cast ‘out of her fool’s paradise’ (‘The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex’ 173).

In a letter to Peter Thorpe dated 20 January, 1941, in *The Hound and the Falcon*, White is still haunted psychologically by this event as she questions what she perceives to be an hypocritical basis for the Catholic Church’s rules on sex. She writes,

I remember when I was about 14 living through months of terror because I thought I must have committed some appalling crime and was being turned into an animal for a punishment. I thought what was happening to me happened to no one else and I was full of shame and misery. I think the Church’s *rules* about sex are probably all right (though very difficult to practice) but I hate the usual expression of them. There is so much more in sex than ‘bestial appetite’ and surely people should be taught to accept their human nature, understand it and deal with it rather than to treat it as a hideous phenomenon…. By all means, let’s say we’re weak, liable to corruption, full of faults, but to hate one’s whole nature is to hate the work of God. Of course we must try to get rid of our egotism and keep low and be sorry for our sins, but this bitter condemnation of those very impulses which have led us to God seems to me hypocritical and false. I want to love God and not to hate myself but gradually become detached from and indifferent to myself. (65-66; emphasis in original)

Whilst the discovery of White’s own novel is a traumatic event for her (a point to which I shall return in more detail), I would like to first propose that it is no accident that the novel remains unfinished in *Frost in May* because it reflects White’s assertion of the right to express herself sexually and autonomously in her writing in a culture in which sexuality is suppressed. Of course, Nanda’s heroine is placed in a situation that is suggestive of a degree of sexual excitation being provoked; this is interesting considering abstinence from sexual relations outside marriage is a key Catholic tenet, and yet it may be this biological reference to sexuality that serves to emancipate White politically in her right to write sexually and therefore autonomously in her work as an aspiring modernist. As White was to do in finding a balance between appealing to aesthetics whilst writing autobiographically, which I addressed in Chapter Two, she also attempts to find a balance between modernist aims of female sexual liberation and her sense of identity in a Catholic culture. This is no easy feat. As it transpires, White’s anxiety only increases.

Modernism emerged in defiance of what David Seelow describes in his book *Radical Modernism and Sexuality: Freud/Reich/D. H. Lawrence and Beyond* (2005), as a period in which Victorian moralistic ideals on sexuality equated to a sexual perversion[[57]](#footnote-57) and a time where ‘women are the objects of massive sexual repression and are exiled from sexual pleasure’ (19). During the modernist sexual rebellion, dancers disrobed themselves of traditional forms of expression found in ballet and vaudeville for more experimental forms in less-clad attire;[[58]](#footnote-58) and flappers enlightened society to what legs looked like below the knee, and the allure of wearing an abundance of make-up and having casual sex after a night of consuming alcohol. Writers, too, like James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, inserted the body into literature using sexually provocative language in defiance of legal authorities.[[59]](#footnote-59) In Wyndham Lewis’s study of sexuality in *Time and Western Man* (1927), he remarks how ‘every licence where “sex” is concerned has been invested with the halo of an awful and thrilling lawlessness’ (27). It is a sentiment that aptly describes this revelatory modernist movement to which White aspires.

White makes a modernist gesture in her deliberate denouncement of silencing sexual expression that doubles as an attempt at female sexual liberation in her longing to find a balance between art and religion, thus breaking through the boundaries of a Catholic patriarchal discourse on sexuality. In a letter to Peter Thorpe dated 18 April, 1941, in the *Hound and the Falcon*, White states: ‘I can in my heart renounce neither religion nor art: I can only try and combine the two in some mixture that suits a mixed nature’ (118). *Frost in May* illustrates, however, the tension between White’s modernist aspirations and yet her own need to fit into the religious culture that brings her sense of self into creative and psychological conflict, which is projected into her protagonist. As aforementioned, Nanda describes a highly provocative scene between her heroine and admirers, coming to a climax with a moment when ‘the heroine’s other admirer, after having “swooned with her in the languid ecstasies of a waltz” took her out on the balcony and “pressed a kiss of burning passion on her scarlet mouth, a kiss which had some of the reckless intoxication of the music that throbbed out from the Hungarian band they could hear in the distance”’ (202).

On an intellectual level, the patriarchal restraints imposed upon Nanda lead her to revisualise herself sexually in her imagination, as described in the writing of her transgressive novel. In a way, although White has a flirtation with modernism herself, it is fleeting because her ties with her religion ultimately triumph over her modernist aspirations. In *The Hound and the Falcon*, White observes, ‘I am keenly aware of my own egotism, vanity, impatience and self-indulgence. And I do not mean to give up the practice of religion because that religion seems full of anomalies and repulsive elements.… I can only say that I want to accept what is, however repugnant and painful, as opposed to what I would *like to be*, however delightful’ (73; emphasis in original).

White wants to balance religion and aesthetics, but her feelings run much deeper than a superficial acceptance of her limitations as an artist: ‘I am tormented sometimes by miseries and scruples and by the awful old fear that it is all my fault if I can’t see … that I am fundamentally perverted’ (qtd. in Maitland xi, *HF*). For White, this sense of inherent perversion can only lead her in one direction: ‘None of us likes to dwell on the doctrine of hell and yet there is, for us, some fearful inevitability in it’ (qtd. in Maitland xi, *HF*). White expresses this sentiment most poignantly in a letter to Peter Thorpe dated 8 February, 1941, in which she equates being female with being defective:

It is a profound truth that makes Eve the Channel of the fall and the Church’s defects may be due to her femaleness. A woman is more corruptible, I believe, than a man because of the slower rhythm of her life, as still water breeds scum. And haven’t you often noticed, in men, that it is their female side that betrays and corrupts them? It is not for nothing that in no religion is God imagined as female. (*HF* 86)

In *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart, and Anais Nin* (2000), Elizabeth Podnieks makes an important observation: ‘It seems that White had identified herself with this original mother by accepting some inherited responsibility for “the fall”. More specifically, she seems to have been connecting Eve’s sin with the sin of her writing’ (219). It was not until meeting Benedicta de Bezer that White convinced herself on a conscious level that she was not guilty. Having an unbecoming nature alone did not suffice to provide White with a Guilty verdict (Podnieks 219). Podnieks views the ‘Not Guilty’ verdict as White ‘writing beyond the ending of perhaps the greatest patriarchal narrative in history, replacing it with a modernist ending in which women may empower themselves to “name and control”, as Jardine suggests, their own presence in religious and cultural discourses’ (219). Moreover, Podnieks has positive hopes for White: She suggests that White’s diaries illustrate the modernist mindset in its aesthetic application of generating fragments that cohesively work into a unified whole, sliding into a space that ‘reaches out to other women’ (173). To some extent, this view is reinforced in Broe’s sentiment. Broe observes the tension between writing about one’s trauma to regain some control over it in defiance of Freud’s renouncement of his seduction theory. She suggests that incest can be associated

with perhaps the most brutal form of exile imposed on a woman – exile within her family and from her own body by her abuser…. Narratives of these abuses may be considered modernist in that incest survivors transform their textual spaces into metaphoric bodies, of which they may assume or regain control. In so doing, women challenge Freud, who initially formulated a ‘seduction theory’ in a belief that incest was real, but who later abandoned it in favour of incest as fantasy. (93-94)

I find these views a little problematic. Whilst White inserts the body into her literature, it is not to challenge Freud. And, although I agree that White was writing sexually to find a space that reaches out to other women, it is not through her diaries that she achieves this but in her autobiographical fiction. In *The Sugar House*, White recalls that her expulsion from the convent was such a traumatic event for her that it impacted her writing except for a little black notebook: ‘Though it contained much that might make her reasonably feel guilty, was exempt from the blight, simply because it was secret’ (163). Here, White is making a reference to her diaries. They were written in secret and were not published until after her death. With regard to feelings of guilt, White can acknowledge a ‘not guilty’ verdict in relation to her writing, but she also needs to acknowledge that ‘Somehow, the *unconscious* has to accept the “NOT GUILTY” verdict’ (4 Aug. 1949; my emphasis).

Given the critics’ views expressed here, whilst White’s sexuality is perceived as empowering, her case appears uncertain in her need to belong to the very culture she rejects, which expresses itself in a perception of her female sexuality for what it is: a sin against God’s decree for the purpose of it then becoming morally useful as a lesson on sexual abstinence. White’s sin, in other words, is inscribed in a patriarchal discourse, but it is one that also contributes to her creative and psychological plights. In a letter written to Peter Thorpe on 2 June, 1941, she voices her spiritual anguish directed at God:

If you damn me, I accept it. I wanted to find the truth. If I cannot take it in the only form you prescribe it, then damned I must be and I won’t complain. But if you want me to see what I don’t see, however much I strain my eyes, you must either do something about my eyesight or convince me if I’ve committed the sin against the Holy Ghost in which case I’m damned already. (130)

As a ‘fallen woman’ in the eyes of God and her more direct paternal authoritative figure, her father, White’s failure to express herself sexually in her writing, coupled with her preoccupation with religious Catholic tenets on sexuality, serve to hamper her creative expression that had haunted her since the age of fifteen. White is torn between reason and the ability to reconcile her disillusionment with her religion and transcend it to form a real relationship with God, which draws parallels with the relationship with her father. In her essay, ‘A Passionate and Troubled History: Antonia White and Her Father’ (2000), Therese Strauss-Noll notes the sexual metaphors in White’s recollection of this event in her life. As Strauss-Noll observes, White recalls that ‘My impulse to write a novel began in the year following the beginning of menstruation. My father, as it were, killed the child. He thought of it as having been conceived in sin’ (qtd. in Strauss-Noll 133).

White’s feminine role as the weaker sex cannot be averted because, whilst asserting her sexuality in *Frost in May*, for example, she has perpetuated the stereotypical vision of Eve’s daughters as giddy, frivolous, and men’s seducers by the Church. The reality of the situation is that writing nearly twenty years after her time at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, White is forced back into her feminine role as the scarlet woman in *The Lost Traveller* in an attempt to seek the love from her father that she had lost in *Frost in May*. It is through White’s sexuality that she becomes attractive to and valued by men, but due to her inability to separate sexuality from male power, something that she wants to possess and which becomes manifest in her heroine’s transgression in *Frost in May*, Nanda’s heroine may not recognise her enemy for who he is, a cunning seducer who hides his corrupt sexuality behind a focus on feminine virtue.

In contrast, White presents a different side to Claude Batchelor (formerly Mr. Grey in *Frost in May*) and his relationship with religion in *The Lost Traveller*:

His mind was satisfied but his heart remained cold. He felt nothing that could be called a religious impulse; no craving for God, no awakening of faith…. One Sunday evening he went alone to Benediction in the French church in Soho. Although he now knew its meaning, the service no longer impressed him as it had done in his Cambridge days. Usually insensitive to details, he was annoyed by the perfunctory movements of the fat, blue-jowled priest who gabbled the Latin in a strong Marseilles accent’ (22).

What follows is an interesting scenario.**[[60]](#footnote-60) Whilst in church, fidgeting with his rosary, Claude is distracted by a ‘sallow, sullenly handsome’ girl who has the looks of Isabel. After she removes her ‘white kid gloves’, Claude suddenly felt, ‘without warning, the demons of his imagination leap on her, stripping her, using her with a cold brutality of lust’ (23). The girl, as if seeing into Claude's mind, shifts further away. Her potential knowledge of his debased thoughts leave him under an enormous burden of guilt:**

**For the first time in his life, he seemed to grasp the meaning of evil. He was conscious of something corrupt in the depths of his nature; something at once frigid, impure and violent.... He felt as if he were isolated from every human contact; locked in a dark cell that was both icy and suffocating. (23)**

**As illustrated in this scene, Claude initially deludes himself into believing that the sexual desire is also mutual, indicative in the girl’s removal of her glove that is like a veil being removed to expose the mutuality of sexual desire in Claude's unconscious. Fortunately for Claude, when he comes to awareness, he is aware of an unearthly presence and the words ‘I am the way and the truth and the life’ light up in his mind (23). He knew at that moment that ‘Christ was the key that could unlock his prison of frozen isolation and the key was his for a single act of faith’ (23). In this scene, Catholicism functions as a barrier to sexual excitation and evil abusive impulses, and God is internalised as Claude’s super-ego. Religion can certainly be a mighty prophylactic.**

The idea of a woman’s sexual value in Catholicism is closely tied to Freud’s thoughts on incest prohibition in modern Western men and their ongoing struggle to separate love from desire. As expressed in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud makes it clear that with regard to the nature of incestuous desires in fathers, ‘in their unconscious there is nothing they would like more than to violate [the taboo of incest], but they are afraid to do so; they are afraid precisely because they would like to, and the fear is stronger than the desire’ (31).[[61]](#footnote-61) This is a highly revealing statement that illustrates the repression of incestuous desires in primitive men, and yet their ambivalence towards the taboo, because in order for there to be an ‘obsessional prohibition’, there must have been a time when the practice of incest was made a taboo, ‘perhaps merely as a result of tradition transmitted through parental and social authority’ (31). Freud attributes this ambivalence to the taboo as a conflict between an unconscious desire but a very conscious fear that emerges in the way fear emerges in neurotics and in religion, even if that fear has no tangible foundation, except the inclination towards the ‘prohibited action’, which remains in the unconscious.

The relationship between Nanda and her father in *Frost in May* is certainly sexually charged. On a deeper level, then, perhaps Nanda’s transgressive act is White’s way of unconsciously exposing her father’s sin; moreover, because Nanda’s characters do not reach the stage of conversion, she is effectively denying her father religious agency; and yet this transgressive act is punished. Nanda’s sin, Nanda’s perversity even, with which White identifies, is brought to the surface whilst simultaneously concealing her father’s sin. The fact that Nanda allows her transgressive act to be punished suggests that she is not only protecting her father but doing so due to deeply-embedded feelings of guilt.

Despite Freud’s perspective, when White wrote this scene, it was after a long period as a lapsed Catholic. By the early 1940s, and after a long discussion with her letter correspondent, Peter Thorpe, in *The Hound and the Falcon*, White was starting to build a new relationship with her estranged religion. So, why would she include a scene like this in a novel that already has strong Oedipal tones? Is this scene a veil for Cecil Botting’s incestuous desires for his daughter? After all, the young girl in the church had the ‘looks of Isabel’.[[62]](#footnote-62)

According to Dunn’s account, Cecil Botting was attracted to the Catholic Church because it symbolised something ‘exotic’ with ‘theatrical rituals’ that made him feel that he would be joining a ‘spiritual aristocracy’ to compensate for his lower-class background (Dunn 36): ‘The sensuous, hedonistic side of him, so long suppressed beneath his ferocious capacity for hard work and filial responsibility’ saw an outlet in the Catholic Church (35-6). As Dunn observes, perhaps White fictionalises how she perceived her father’s epiphany in *The Lost Traveller*: ‘He was conscious of something corrupt in the depths of his nature; something at once frigid, impure and violent’ (qtd. in Dunn 36).

Cecil’s introduction to the Catholic religion was instigated by Nevinson de Courcy (Toby), a friend from the Cambridge days (Dunn 36). It has been suggested that Toby and Cecil may have had some form of homosexual love, although there is no evidence to suggest that they engaged in a sexual relationship. Sandra Chait observes that for Cecil Botting ‘sex and religion were anathema to each other’ (154). It could be that Cecil’s relationship with Nevinson drove him to Catholicism, but readers cannot know for sure. What readers are made privy to is that ‘White implies that he saw it as salvation for whatever “sins” he bore on his conscience’ (Chait 155).

A fundamental premise that underpins Freud’s Oedipus complex is that it aligns itself with larger socio-cultural ideals about moral human conduct as it pertains to the incest barrier. At the heart of Freud’s theory on the incest taboo is an antagonism between one’s instinctual life and one’s cultural considerations. In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dated 31 May, 1897, Freud confidently asserts that he ‘shall very soon uncover the source of morality’ (249) right before disclosing a dream in which he had ‘overaffectionate feelings’ for his daughter Mathilde. He concludes that the dream ‘shows the fulfillment of my wish to catch a *Pater* as the originator of neurosis’ (249; emphasis in original). Of course, Freud renounces this statement upon his creation of the Oedipus complex. Under the ‘Definition of “Holy”’ in this draft, Freud writes, ‘The horror of incest (something impious) is based on the fact that, as a result of communal sexual life (even in childhood), the members of a family remain together permanently and become incapable of joining with strangers’ (252). Interestingly, Freud does not conclude that incest is immoral, which would be a reasonable conclusion to make in cultural terms, but instead focuses on the social implications of incest as ‘anti-social—civilization consists in this progressive renunciation’ (252).

As Freud develops his ideas on incest, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), he asserts that ‘Respect for this barrier is essentially a cultural demand made by society. Society must defend itself against the danger that the interests which it needs for the establishment of higher social units may be swallowed up by the family’ (128). Put more plainly, passage through the Oedipus complex is essential ‘for the progress of civilization’ (128). His stance on sexual morality is similar to the one he observes in ‘“Civilized” Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness’ (1908) as being ‘sanctioned by religion’ (39). In this same essay, Freud explains, as he does in numerous essays, that reproduction itself comes about from a child’s psycho-sexual development, which starts with the sexual instincts and auto-eroticism in infancy, which, not being conducive to the needs of reproduction, become sublimated in ‘cultural activities’ that serve to suppress ‘*perverse* elements of sexual excitation’ (39-40; emphasis in original). One brand of pervert is one ‘in whom an infantile fixation to a preliminary sexual aim has prevented the primacy of the reproductive function from being established’ (41). He writes,

Where the sexual instinct is fairly intense, but perverse, [one possible outcome] … is that … under the influence of education and social demands, a suppression of the perverse instincts is indeed achieved, but it is a kind of suppression which is really no suppression at all. It can be better described as a suppression that has failed. The inhibited sexual instincts are, it is true, no longer expressed as such―and this constitutes the success of the process―but they find expression in other ways, which are quite as injurious to the subject and make him quite as useless for society as satisfaction of the suppressed instincts in an unmodified form would have done. (42-43)

Here, Freud’s basic point seems to be that if men were not held to such high cultural expectations (women do not have these expectations), they would be less inclined to become, for example, sexual perverts, which is how White has come to perceive herself in religio-cultural terms.

At the heart of Freud’s theory on the incest taboo is an antagonism between one’s instinctual life and one’s cultural considerations. For example, in the ‘Editor’s Note’ preceding ‘“Civilized” Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness’ (1908), James Strachey draws our attention to ‘Draft N’ attached to a memorandum Freud sent to Fliess on May 31, 1897. In this draft, Freud writes, ‘incest is anti-social and civilization [interchangeable with the word culture] consists in a progressive renunciation of it’ (180). Strachey explains that this current essay effectively summarises the antagonism prevalent between one’s instinctual life and one’s culture in the subject matter under discussion in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Locheme describes the function of Confession according to Catholic doctrine as thus: ‘Gerson, the celebrated chancellor of the University of Paris, writes, “A means only possessed by the Christian religion to guide children upon the path that leads to Christ, is confession”’ (qtd. in Lochemes 54). It is a means to a ‘reconciliation’ with God through the processes of committing sin, acknowledging that sin, feeling guilt, and then being forgiven for feeling that guilt (54). Self-denial is normal (54). However, given White’s depiction of Clara’s father’s temptation in church, it seems as if she feels the need to shift attention away from her crime to her father’s. The nature of Catholic confession, however, is a forgiving one: ‘That reconciling of man to God is the purpose of Confession. When we sin, we deprive ourselves of God’s grace. And by doing so, we make it even easier to sin some more. The only way out of this downward cycle is to acknowledge our sins, to repent of them, and to ask God’s forgiveness. Then, in the Sacrament of Confession, grace can be restored to our souls, and we can once again resist sin.’ (Richert, par. 4).

Ironically, in *The Future of an Illusion,* Freud writes,

It is doubtful whether men were in general happier at a time when religious doctrines held unrestricted sway; more moral they certainly were not. They have always known how to externalise the precepts of religion and thus to nullify their intentions. The priests, whose duty it was to ensure obedience to religion, met them half-way in this. God’s kindness must lay a retraining hand on His justice. One sinned, and then one made a sacrifice or did penance and then one was free to sin once more. (220)

According to Freud, this is a good thing because it continually establishes human weakness in the face of God’s greatness. In analogous terms, from a Freudian perspective in relation to sexuality, he writes that there are

Two origins of the sense of guilt: one arising from fear of an authority, and the other, later on, arising from fear of the super-ego. The first insists upon a renunciation of instinctual satisfactions; the second, as well as doing this, presses for punishment, since the continuance of the forbidden wishes cannot be concealed from the super-ego—the demands of conscience—is to be understood. It is simply a continuation of the severity of the external authority, to which it has succeeded and which it has in part replaced. (319-320)

A ‘renunciation’ is no less than a desire to transform, which is a platform upon which Freudian psychoanalytic treatment itself is posited. At this juncture, it is important to reconsider an important question raised in the Introduction because, on the one hand, White aspires to a literary modernist attempt at female sexual liberation as a war waged on suppressed sexuality in a dominant Catholic culture. On the other hand, readers may simultaneously be witness to a discourse that could easily be passed off as a confession at the intersection of religious and Freudian ideals on female sexuality: How can readers navigate an autobiographical novel like *Frost in May* that seems to testify to and yet testify against, paradoxically, the suppression of female sexuality?

Nanda’s sexual corruption is in line with larger moral ideals on sexuality at the intersection of socio-cultural ideals and Freud’s Oedipus complex. In White reimagining her own sexual transgression and by putting it into discourse with its subsequent punishment, what follows is a transformation of her own desire. Her writing a transgressive novel, therefore, as it was for Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit, was an act that was expected, found out, and subsequently punished. White’s return to the earlier traumatic event and vocalising it serves as a confession that can lead to forgiveness, something perhaps that White had denied for so long in redirected antagonism toward the Catholic Church.

It is not until 1940 that White begins to move towards a calmer relationship with religion and, in particular, the Catholic Church. During 1940 and 1941, White engages in a lengthy and intense correspondence with Peter Thorpe, a married and previously lapsed Catholic who had now returned to the bosom of the Catholic Church. In later life, still identified with her first protagonist, referring to herself in a letter to Peter Thorpe dated 11 Dec., 1940, as the ‘grown up “Nanda”’ (15). In *The Hound and the Falcon*, White writes:

I begin to have what I never had in childhood, when we automatically went to Communion every day, a hunger for the Blessed Sacrament. And I begin to see dimly the connection between accepted suffering and internal peace, joy and light, the cross and the resurrection not successive, but simultaneous. I understand now words of St. Bonaventure which I repeated automatically for years: ‘Transfix me with the most joyous and healthful wound of Thy love.’ (‘7 February 1941’, 81)

What is particularly striking to me are the words ‘Transfix me with the most joyous and healthful wound of Thy love’ because it is a statement that resonates with White in relation to her relationship with her father, whose conversion was so dramatic that I have to wonder if there was not some underlying guilt for which he was over-compensating and projected onto White. In a letter to Cyril Connolly in April, 1942, White makes an important soul-searching statement:

The psychologists would presumably say that Catholicism was one of the factors in my life with which I had failed to come to terms, as I had failed to come to terms with money, sex, and writing. Obviously the Catholic Church would be very much mixed up for me with my father, who was directly responsible for my becoming a Catholic in the first place. Analysis convinced me without any shadow of doubt that my ambivalent attitude of unconscious love and hate towards him was one of the prime factors of my neurosis. Therefore I would naturally project into my attitude towards the Church, particularly such a very authoritative Church, the same mixture of love and hate, submissiveness and rebellion. In rebelling against him, I would naturally rebel against the Church too, and also feel guilty about it. (160)

**Much of White’s writing was preoccupied with navigating feelings of guilt that are internalised socio-cultural influences. However, at the source of White’s guilt is the feeling of having betrayed her father.** White’s creation of *Frost in May* is an attempt at a confession for having betrayed her parents, which mixes religious and psychoanalytic influences on her life, particularly with regard to her perception of herself sexually through her writing. T**hese feelings of betrayal intersect with White’s own deep-rooted feelings of betrayal in maternal terms that become manifest in White’s relations with the nuns.**

**Would White have written *Frost in May* in the way she did had she not been highly influenced by Freudian theory and her own psychoanalytic treatments? Whilst I cannot prove this is so, the tensions and nuances between two seemingly different paradigms like Catholicism and Freudian theory intersected in White’s literary landscape, which illuminated how these areas impacted her sense of self. Reading *Frost in May* alongside her diaries revealed not only the spiritual anguish that White projected into her protagonist, but how female sexuality was deployed and harnessed for women like White who were torn between advocating for female sexual liberation but riddled with the opposite notion of women as fundamentally sexually immoral: a deeply-rooted sin going back to Eve in the Garden of Eden.** Interestingly, while Freud often mocked religious principles, it is ironic that his own Oedipus complex theory’s principles drew such a close resemblance to Catholicism, which is indicative of the influence of socio-cultural factors that made their way into his thinking.

Due to prevailing notions of Freud’s Oedipus complex at the time in which she was writing, mechanisms of condemnation, guilt, and confession based on the gravity of betrayal against authoritative figures served to transform their patients’ sexual desires for the larger socio-cultural good. This method is not dissimilar to those employed by the Catholic Church for the purpose of moral improvement, based on the initial sexual betrayal by Adam and Eve. Unfortunately, White identified with Eve in conscious and unconscious terms and struggled to navigate her female sexuality between three influential forces in her life: her father, her psychoanalysts, and the Church.

As aforementioned in other places and in this chapter, I allude to the possibility of paternal sexual impropriety. In this chapter, it has been raised that Cecil’s new-found religious devotion actually betrays deep-rooted feelings of guilt about possessing incestuous desires. Whilst it has not been my aim to validate sexual abuse in White’s autobiographical fiction, questions of how to authenticate recollections of trauma in general dominate contemporary trends today. It is to these questions that I shall turn my attention in the next chapter.

Beyond these questions, I shift my attention from a discussion on memory to betrayal. I shift from the Freudian idea of childhood betrayal to parents’ betrayal of the child because in White’s situation, whether or not she experienced sexual abuse, her life and way she interacted with others was overcast by the deeply traumatising impact of feeling betrayed. The strongest betrayal of all was by White’s mother for severe maternal neglect, which White attempts to work through in her autobiographical fiction.

Contemporary Trends on Sexual Trauma and Memory in

Clinical Practice and Trauma Theory: A Comparative Study

*Rise of the Feminist Movement on Sexual Abuse in Literature ‒ Trauma and the ‘Unspeakable’ in Literary Studies ‒ Maternal Betrayal*

*Writing Autobiographical Fiction towards Healing*

The aim of this chapter is threefold: 1) to show how far trends in contemporary thinking about sexual trauma have developed or deviated from Freud’s psychoanalytic theories. In this section, I shall also draw out the significance of those trends at the intersection of socio-political considerations; 2) to discuss similar trends and significances in literary studies; and 3) based on my findings, to provide a new perspective on the representation of sexual trauma in autobiographical fiction that revolves around ideas on betrayal and the potential healing benefits of writing.

Due to limitations in proving that White suffered father-daughter incest, as illustrated in the previous chapters, it has not been my aim in this thesis to prove that she was a victim of sexual abuse. However, today, debates still revolve around why it is that aim cannot be achieved. These debates, from a variety of paradigms, cover the same ground as those expressed by Freud and Ferenczi. For example, there are studies that address the psychological impact of childhood sexual abuse in both mainstream psychological and psychiatric literature to feminists’ trauma studies; these studies speak to Ferenczi’s views on psychosis as a defence mechanism against conscious knowledge of abuse that may have been repressed. As a result of feminists’ efforts, in particular (e.g., Herman, 1987, 2000; Rush 1981; Westerlund, 1986; Bass and Davis, 2008), victims of sexual trauma found a public voice in a new market of trauma studies, autobiographical novels, and memoirs.

Cathy Caruth, a revered trauma theorist on memory in literary studies, takes the focus away from the surface discussion of sexual abuse validation to a deeper and perhaps more far-reaching exploration into memory itself. Her research seeks to discover to what extent memory survives any traumatic event and is then later narrated in an attempt to speak the ‘unspeakable’. She utilises Freud’s idea of repetition-compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as scaffolding to support her claim in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), for example, of a rupture between the original traumatic event in which, as a defence mechanism, part of the knowledge has been relegated to the unconscious, to how traumatic flashbacks function as haunting voices that cry out from a second wound, which serve to defy and bear witness to an original trauma that cannot be grasped completely in the past or in the present.

As a result of my reading of Caruth’s ideas of trauma speaking from a wound, alongside Freud’s theory of repetition-compulsion, I modify Caruth’s position to illustrate how both White’s protagonists and readers serve to defy and bear witness to White’s original traumatic event at the root of which is maternal betrayal. Using Freud’s *fort-da* example as an analogy that shifts attention from a child’s betrayal to maternal betrayal, many episodes of White’s negative portrayals of her mother and the need to create distance from her in her autobiographical fiction go beyond the confines of the (pre)Oedipal narrative. For White, writing is not just bound up with her sexual obsession for her father; it also becomes an act of revenge for maternal neglect that, in a way, also helps her to cope with deeply rooted feelings of betrayal.

**Rise of the Feminist Movement on Sexual Abuse**

Since the period in which White was writing, there have been waves of feminist writings that demand a voice to be heard about the damaging psychological effects of father-daughter incest. In what feminists perceive to be a dominating and suppressive patriarchal framework, they argue for individual expression to emerge and fight against the inadmission of incest. From the 1940s onward, theories relating to Freud’s Oedipus complex developed into increasing interest in a child’s acting out his or her Oedipal desires, particularly with regard to girls acting out in some professionals’ attempts to exonerate fathers who were perceived as having been seduced by their daughters and giving in to the seduction. As Rachel Devlin observes in her article, ‘“Acting Out the Oedipal Wish”: Father-Daughter Incest and the Sexuality of Adolescent Girls in the United States, 1941-1965’ (2005), Ernest Jones, for example, suggests that, due to a father playing a part in his daughter’s ‘acting out’, which ‘was set in motion by conflicts with her mother in combination with the mobilisation of her Oedipal desires with the onset of puberty’, his role in the incestuous act is insignificant (618).[[64]](#footnote-64) Jones firmly places the onus of blame on the daughter’s shoulders that can be internalized by her. This can have a devastating impact on a child, for example, the inability to speak about the abuse out of feelings of guilt and shame for being responsible for the seduction. For example, according to feminist trauma theorist, Florence Rush, in her book *The Best-Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (1980), a child who has been abused may feel that she is responsible because there is either something wrong with her or because she does not know that this form of ‘love’ is unacceptable until later on in life, thus unwittingly partaking in her father’s seduction.

In her book, Rush describes a case she had encountered during her time as a social worker in the 1960s that speaks to this concern. Twelve-year-old Annie had been in a two-year incestuous relationship with her father. When Rush told Annie that she knew about the relationship, Annie avoided talking about it. The supervising psychiatrist to whom Rush reported the information declared that Annie could not talk about the relationship because ‘she’s too guilty and ashamed’ (100). Rush proceeds to recount the psychiatrist’s position on father-daughter seduction: ‘it was her deep, unconscious, incestuous wish for her father that made her feel guilty’ (100). When Rush began working with Annie, her father had just been sent to jail for robbery, not incest (100). Rush also states that she was categorically advised not to talk to Annie about Annie’s incestuous relationship with her father because it would exacerbate Annie’s feelings of guilt and shame and, according to the treatment center at which Rush worked, rightly so (100).

Evidenced by Rush’s experience working on Annie’s case, the incest taboo has become entrenched in society, but in a way that deviates from Freud’s original theory in two ways. Freud’s premise that the child needs to be taught that her family members are sexually out of bounds for the progress of civilization has shifted to a) a need to protect the child from the painful acknowledgement of her own Oedipal desires that are now fully integrated into the conscious, as evidenced by her acting out, and b) to let play out the self-punishment that the child is already inflicting on herself by having these feelings of guilt.

Contrarily, as Ellen Bass and Laura Davis observe in their book, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (1988/2008), the blame should never fall on the child:

Even if a sixteen-year-old girl walks into her living room naked and throws herself on her father, he is still not justified in touching her sexually. A responsible father would say, ‘There seems to be a problem here.’ He would tell her to put clothes on; he’d discuss it with her, get professional help if necessary. Regardless of age or circumstances, there is never an excuse for sexual abuse. It is absolutely the responsibility of adults not to be sexual with children. (124)

This scenario, although presented to show the role of the ideal father, highlights the problem of allocating blame for sexual abuse. In Bass and Davis’s suggestion that the girl’s father should engage in this type of dialogue with his daughter, they are illustrating that he may not be the sexual aggressor and that his daughter may be acting out Oedipal desires. However, a normal sixteen-year-old girl would not behave in this way. The fact that she behaves in this sexual manner suggests that her frame of reference in terms of sexual boundaries has been violated in some way, but by whom is difficult to prove. This is an interesting turn of events, considering Freud also completely renounced his theory of repression in relation to girls’ experiences of incest, partly for the same reasons.

In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess on September 21, 1897, Freud makes a startling revelation that, due to inconclusive evidence in his cases of hysteria, he can no longer sustain his seduction theory: ‘… in all cases, the *father*, not excluding my own, had to be accused of being perverse—the realisation of the unexpected frequency of hysteria, with precisely the same conditions prevailing in each, whereas surely such widespread perversions against children are not very probable’ (264). I would like to draw your attention to the phrase ‘not excluding my own’. Freud is stating in no uncertain terms that his own father had been branded a pervert. This claim is obviously unacceptable to Freud, a claim that reveals in Freud’s mind two completely incompatible ideas that may have contributed to his fervent denials of the reality of incestuous abuse.

In ‘Freud on Sexual Trauma: An Historical Review of Seduction and Betrayal’ (1986), Elaine Westerlund suggests that a turning point in Freud’s renouncement of his seduction theory was related to Freud’s inability to complete his own self-analysis with respect to accusations of sexual abuse directed at his own father by some of Freud’s siblings. Westerlund suspects that although Freud does not consider himself one of these victims, evidence suggests that the contrary may be true: ‘the acknowledgement of a theoretical error, however shameful to Freud, would surely have been less so than an acknowledgement of his father’s guilt. Indeed, whatever affects have been associated with finding himself in error, they would certainly have been less painful than those associated with the knowledge of his own sexual abuse by his father’ (303).

Whilst it cannot be concluded that Freud was sexually abused by his father, he does provide what I perceive to be an attempt at wit by declaring in a letter dated October 3, 1897, that he was abused but by ‘an ugly, elderly, but clever woman … his nursemaid’ (268).[[65]](#footnote-65) Westerlund suggests that to circumnavigate around concealing the true aggressor of sexual abuse is to assign to it a person of lesser significance ‘in the patriarchal society’, and one ‘whose morals could be brought into question’ (303). She proceeds, and rightly so, to describe that Freud’s writings often depict women committing sexual offenses to children in the guise of caretakers—an area that is central to feminist writing—to highlight patriarchal values. She observes that ‘Freud’s ideas after he adopted the Oedipal theory, in which reports of seduction for the most part could be attributed to fantasy, were certainly more in keeping with the patriarchal values of Vienna. Victorian men were not discouraged from the practice of forbidden sex as long as scandal was avoided’ (306). Indeed, it has been brought to light (Masson, Roazen, Hale),[[66]](#footnote-66) that some of Freud’s colleagues acted inappropriately with patients (Sandor Ferenczi)[[67]](#footnote-67) and at times with children (Ernest Jones), not excluding one’s own children (Wilhelm Fliess).[[68]](#footnote-68) For example, Westerlund concludes that ‘information previously presented offers little to dispel the notion that … Freud was more concerned with discretion than he was with opposing immoral or illegal sexual practices’ (306).

Father-daughter incest is incredibly damaging for the victim, but are some feminists being too aggressive in their assertions? Has the topic of incest become a platform for a larger feminist socio-political statement? Janice Doane and Devon Hodges make an interesting observation that speaks to these questions. In their article, ‘It’s about Patriarchal Power: White Feminists Speak Out’ (2009), they ask, ‘individual transgression is at the heart of the understanding of incest as a sexual act, but who is the transgressor?’ (47). Doane and Hodges revisit feminists’ claims of ‘the despotism of patriarchal power’, citing Herman and Hirschman, for example, who refer to father-daughter incest as ‘“a paradigm of female sexual victimisation” within a radically unequal patriarchal society’ (qtd. in Doane and Hodges 47). Doane and Hodges argue in opposition to the feminists’ position that seems to attack all men in their ‘personal is political’ campaign. According to Doane and Hodges, feminists shift their attention from the familial incestuous experience to one in which daughters adopt an incestuous way of life by marrying men like their fathers with greater stature in age, height, wealth, and power. Doane and Hodges state, and perhaps rightly so, that in a home environment where the father functions as both provider and carer, ‘not all fathers have the same power; not all daughters are equally powerless; not all gendered power inequalities within the family result in incest’ (49). Doane and Hodges make a valuable assertion that complicates this delicate discussion of father-daughter incest.

Nevertheless, the feminist presence in the 1980s, in particular, was enormously influential in a positive way. To bust the incest taboo and awaken society to the devastating psychological impact of sexual abuse, feminists—were themselves inspired by acclaimed autobiographical novels like Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), which address incest. The feminist movement brought works like these to the public’s attention, which inspired other women to come forward about their incestuous experiences. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was an explosion of autobiographical novels and memoirs that courageously dealt with the topic of incest, such as Sylvia Fraser’s *My Father’s House* (1987), Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1993), among many others.

On the surface, Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* is successful in its depiction of dramatising the bitter effects of impotency for women in the face of extreme adversity. In the opening pages, Allison presents an illiterate, drunken family fumbling through medical document procedures as they attempt to legitimise Ruth Anne’s arrival. After making a hash of her birth certificate and getting her mother, Anney, irate, Granny justifies the blunder: ‘The child is proof enough. An’t no stamp on her nobody can see’ (Allison 3). In defiance of the hospital’s need to uphold the name of the father, in the only way she knows how to emotionally support her children, Granny shuts out everybody that she does not care about. Although Granny’s attitude is one that appears admirable in that she doesn’t care what other people think, what becomes evident is the crippling impact of an inadequate matriarchal role model whose misplaced pride threatens to keep her family uneducated, drunk, and in the gutters of society. Generational ignorance is then perpetuated from the matriarch of the family that filters down through her children and spreads its fingers outward, touching and infecting the lives of those who come into contact with them. It is a prime example of how ignorance is a characteristic of illiterate, simple folk who have not much else to do but drink away their lives.

With all the strength she can muster, Anney outwardly fights against the stigma that has been attached to her. She openly hates to be referred to as white trash and ‘hated the memory of every day she’d ever spent bent over other people’s peanuts and strawberry plants while they stood tall and looked at her like she was a rock on the ground’ (3). However, inwardly, Anney is impotent to change her circumstance and hands down the stigma to her daughter, Ruth Anne, who then feels the full weight of her mother’s impotence through her stepfather’s own feelings of impotence.

As Deborah M. Horvitz observes in *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women’s Fiction* (2000), ‘Ruth Anne, victimised by systematic sadism in the form of poverty, is physically and socially deteriorating from hunger, beatings, and humiliation because of her family’s “low” class status. Contextualised by and inextricably linked with these “external” traumas are “internal”, personal, and domestic ones: … Ruth Anne is raped and repeatedly beaten by her stepfather’ (39-40). Daddy Glen’s impotence is most poignantly demonstrated in the following scene: ‘Every time he couldn’t pay the bills, every time mama was too tired too tired to flatter or tease him out of his moods, Daddy Glen’s eyes would turn to me, and my blood would turn to ice’ (233). The final beating came soon after this statement when Ruth Anne does not hear Glen calling out to her. In a fit of rage for what he interpreted to be insolence, he drags Ruth Anne to the bathroom:

I stood, looking up at Daddy Glen, my back straight and my hands curled into fists at my sides. His features were rigid, his neck bright red. He kept one hand on me while he pulled his belt out of its loops with the other. ‘Don’t you say a word,’ he hissed at me. ‘Don’t you dare.’ / No, I thought. I won’t, not a scream, nothing this time…. He was raging, spitting, the blows hitting the wall as often as they hit me. Beyond the door, Mama was screaming. Daddy Glen was grunting. I hated him. I hated him. The belt went up and came down. Fire along my thighs. Pain…. I would not scream. I would not, would not, would not scream. (234)

Despite the courageous act of speaking about sexual abuse, not all reviews are favourable. In their essay, ‘The Incest Survivor Memoir’ (2009), Janice Doane and Devon Hodges note how, for many cynics of sexual abuse, middle-class incest survivor narratives seem too formulaic:

The author―a woman in distress over her contemporary dilemmas―suffers from flashbacks and bodily symptoms that she cannot explain. Operating like a detective, with the assistance of a supportive therapist, she begins to understand the forgotten origin of these symptoms―incest. Then, through a process of reconstruction, she discovers that her father was an evil perpetrator and she a silenced victim. (100)

This distrustful view includes a critique of Betsy Petersen’s memoir. In a *New York Times* review of incest narratives, Carol Tavris declares that ‘Betsy Petersen seems to have completely shut out “the world outside my skin,” and ultimately this is the problem and appeal of the survivor narrative. It places responsibility for the common problems in women’s lives on a single clear villain, someone safely in the woman’s past’ (qtd. in Doane and Hodges 101). Doane and Hodges, quite rightly, point out how the sexual perpetrator in incest survivor narratives is rarely perceived as just a villain. It is more likely that the victim has ambivalent feelings for her abuser, ‘by the daughter’s respect for and anger at her father—and her sense of guilt as well as her feelings of victimisation’ (102). However, these considerations are often lost in a fog of scepticism about the occurrence of the abuse itself, whereby the after effects of sexual trauma are often ignored.

In her article, ‘“Misery Loves Company”: Sexual Trauma, Psychoanalysis and the Market for Misery’ (2012), Victoria Bates refers to memoirs launched since feminist trauma theorists placed a stronger spotlight on sexual abuse, particularly father-daughter incest, as ‘misery memoirs’. One of Bates’s objectives is to draw readers’ attention to the potential for hoaxes in this genre. Similarly, in ‘Witness Or False Witness?: Metrics Of Authenticity, Collective I-Formations, And The Ethic Of Verification In First-Person Testimony’ (2012), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that writing from even a first person perspective invites ‘suspicious reading’ after a slew of hoaxes were uncovered of writers claiming that their memoirs were authentic (590). There are always going to be people who will capitalise on other’s misfortunes. On the one hand, Bates’s use of the adjective ‘misery’ is negative and condescending. She is perpetuating a stigma against writing narratives of incest as a form of self-expression and, perhaps for many, as a tool for healing. On the other hand, she does make an important observation, which is that, oftentimes, the focus of the incestuous narrative is not on the incident of sexual trauma but on the figure of the ‘traumatised female’ and how sexual trauma fits into a larger life narrative (63). However, incest narratives have become a popular genre precisely because there is a ‘traumatised female’ behind the incestuous experience that appeals to an empathetic audience, which may include victims of sexual abuse trying to understand their own suffering. In the UK, memoirs of child sexual abuse account for 30% of non-fiction paperback sales (64) that were deemed by some as ‘pornography of suffering’ and by others as examples of inspiration and redemption (64) and a ‘triumph over adversity’ (65). Bates does not deny any of these claims. According to Nielsen BookScan in the US, which tracks up to 70% of book sales, just between the years 2004 and 2008, sales of memoirs increased by more than 400% (qtd. in Showalter, par. 4).

Narratives persist to meet market demand that also perpetuates a way of understanding child sexual abuse that may not mirror clinical viewpoints, particularly with regard to recovered memories (65). A case in point is Sylvia Fraser’s memoir, *My Father’s House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing* (1987). Fraser describes her experiences of father-daughter incest in the formative years of her life. After suffering from amnesia for forty years, Fraser claims that she started to recover memories of her traumatic past from her toddler years to seventh grade through an analysis of her dreams and then hypnotherapy. For example, in the following dream, Fraser recalls how

*I lie naked on my daddy’s bed, clinging to the covers. His sweat drips on me. I don’t like his wet-ums. His wet-ums splashes me. The scroll on my daddy’s headboard looks like my mother’s lips, scolding: ‘Don’t ever let me dirty dirty catch you!’ I try to count my pennies but my mind gets frightened and goes away like when the big boys at Beechnut playground push you too high on a swing and you scream to get down. I’m afraid to complain because Daddy won’t love me won’t love me love me*.(10; emphasis in original)

The young Sylvia does attempt to stop her father from abusing her by threatening to tell her mother. To this outburst, her father displays his patriarchal authority by threatening Sylvia with consequences should she reveal his sexual assaults, including confiscation of her toys, sending her off to an orphanage, and gassing her most prized possession, her cat Smoky (11-12). Sylvia reaches a point when the acts of incest become too overwhelming:

When the conflict caused by my sexual relationship with my father became too acute to bear, I created a secret accomplice for my daddy by splitting my personality in two. Thus, somewhere around the age of seven, I acquired another self with memories and experiences separate from mine, whose existence was unknown to me. My loss of memory was retroactive. I did not remember my daddy ever having touched me sexually. (15)

What Sylvia may have experienced is dissociation as theorised by Janet. Chris Brewin and Bernice Andrews describe dissociation well in their article, ‘Recovered Memories of Trauma: Phenomenology and Cognitive Mechanisms’ (1998) as

an altered state of consciousness in which ordinary perceptual, cognitive or motor functioning is impaired…. Sometimes these states are accompanied by flashbacks … ranging from fragmentary sensorimotor experiences to the sensation of vividly reliving a whole past experience in the present. Other dissociative states involve what appears to be a separate personality. Although dissociation does not invariably involve amnesia, lack of memory for events experienced in different states is commonly reported. (951)

Fraser’s account of her experiences as a child is certainly vivid, considering the time lapse between her sexual experiences and the age of retrieval of traumatic memories. It is also emotionally driven by its use of language, which can create an emotional response of horror but unwavering support by her readers. Typically, in clinical material, vivid descriptions that appeal to readers’ sensibilities are missing. Despite the harrowing account of Fraser’s recollection, her memoir was written after her father’s death, after her mother’s death, and after her first husband’s death. There is only one person to corroborate her story, and that is her Aunt Estelle, who had allegedly engaged in illicit sibling incest with Fraser’s father. To what extent should readers believe Fraser’s account, especially since her father is not around to defend himself? This is certainly a complex and problematic area that does not come with any easy truths, particularly in the recollection of trauma.

**Trauma and the ‘Unspeakable’ in Literary Studies**

When a person experiences any traumatic event, the concept of the word memory becomes challenging, especially if that person has limited or no recollection of the original experience due to not being able to mentally process the event at the time. This is a concern that has been of interest in studies on memory by literary trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth, Leigh Gilmore, and Dominick LaCapra, who propose that traumatic memories are repressed and come back to haunt subjects in, for example, intrusive thoughts. In *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001), Leigh Gilmore states, ‘the endlessness of … trauma is frequently represented as a haunting, in which the present feels stalked by a past that will not stay properly buried; or as dissociation, where the boundary between past and present, dead and living, is overwhelmed by a sense of their interpenetration, mutual incorporation, and simultaneity’ (92).

Similarly, in *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (2004), LaCapra writes,

The event in historical trauma is punctual and datable. It is situated in the past. The experience is not punctual and has an elusive aspect insofar as it relates to a past that has not passed away—a past that intrusively invades the present and may block or obviate possibilities in the future. So-called traumatic memory carries the experience into the present and future in that the events are compulsively relived or reexperienced as if there were no distance or difference between past and present. In traumatic memory the past is not simply history as over and done with. It lives on experientially and haunts or possesses the self or the community (in the case of shared traumatic events) and must be worked through in order for it to be remembered with some degree of conscious control and critical perspective that enables survival. (56)

These similar perspectives mark a new way of thinking about traumatic memories that derives from the work of, in part, Cathy Caruth, who explores how PTSD becomes manifest in a person’s life experience. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Caruth identifies PTSD as a condition that shapes a survivor’s identity: ‘trauma … does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned’ (151). In other words, the traumatic event at the time of its occurrence has not yet been fully integrated into the person’s consciousness. Part of it is automatically relegated to the unconscious. Caruth believes that the part that has not yet been integrated into consciousness does return at a later date by way of intrusive thoughts and flashbacks (152-153). Caruth observes that, paradoxically, the return of intrusive memories amounts to an impossibility of the survivor actively being able to relate to the original traumatic event because there is a schism between the actual event that was not fully known and a return to a past event that can never be fully recovered precisely because it is in the past. As a result, one cannot rely on the accurate recall of the traumatic event (153).

In a shift from the speculative and emotional underpinnings that come with theories that attempt to fuse experiences and memories of sexual abuse, Caruth, in particular, looks at memory from an angle that straddles epistemological and ontological approaches. Caruth’s influences include Freud, whose text, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), takes center stage in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). Her rationale for using Freud’s text is to illustrate the mechanisms of his theory on how ‘traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness’ (91-92). I would like to delve more deeply into how Caruth addresses Freudian notions of traumatic repetition, which she brings into contemporary focus through the example Freud supplies in Torquato Tasso’s epic poem, *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581).[[69]](#footnote-69) Whilst my interpretation of Tasso’s poem and why Freud included it in his text deviate from Caruth’s, I find her thoughts on psychic wounds quite illuminating. In turn, this leads me to consider how her idea of a voice being released from a wound can be utilised in autobiographical fiction. In order to draw out my argument, I need to explicate Caruth’s own.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth utilises Freud’s text, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to explore the dualistic presence of consciousness and unconsciousness or, as she understands it, the simultaneous presence and absence of knowing in the repetition of a traumatic experience that she illustrates through an interpretation of Freud’s retelling of Tasso’s poem. As the tale goes, Tancred unwittingly slays his beloved Clorinda with a sword in a duel when she is disguised in armour as an enemy knight. Tancred’s infliction of the fatal wound on his beloved Clorinda in the original instance is then repeated after her soul becomes imprisoned in a tree in a magic forest. Tancred is only aware that it is his Clorinda after she cries out. Caruth states that Tancred’s act is ‘not just the unconscious act of the infliction of the injury and its inadvertent and unwished-for repetition, but the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound’ (2). According to Caruth, it is Clorinda’s voice, directed at Tancred, which ‘bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated’ (3). Caruth insightfully suggests that ‘just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature―the way it was precisely not known in the first instance―returns to haunt the survivor later on’ (4).

Caruth situates this haunting on an axis of life and death. She asks, ‘is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories … is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival’ (7). She concludes that ‘the figure of Tancred addressed by the speaking wound [i.e., Clorinda] constitutes … not only a parable of trauma and its uncanny repetition but, more generally, a parable of psychoanalytic theory itself as it listens to a voice that it cannot fully know but to which it nonetheless bears witness’ (9).

Caruth utilises Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) with his emphasis on repetition compulsion as a model for her investigation into the psychic haunting of dissociative memory tied in with motifs of death. In Caruth’s investigation into Freud’s *fort-da* game, for example, she suggests that it is not a game of departure and return but merely one of departure. She addresses the larger question of departure in historical experience in relation to Moses and the Jews’ exodus that incorporates Freud’s notions of repetition compulsion to illustrate that the ‘theory of trauma, as a historical experience of a survival exceeding the grasp of the one who survives, engages a notion of history exceeding individual bounds’ (66). In other words, departure is another term for leaving behind a traumatic experience that has not been fully grasped at the time but ensures survival in a future that is also not fully grasped either. Coupled with her interest in posttraumatic stress disorder, which is essentially a disorder of memory, Caruth revisualises concepts attached to repetition compulsion, which Freud had defined as ‘traumatic neurosis’ (*BPP* 31).

On the one hand, Caruth’s interpretation is very appealing, particularly in relation to the role of the psychoanalyst in the transference situation, who is only privy to a recollected experience that has not been fully grasped by his patient. Likewise, by employing this interpretative strategy in relation to White’s autobiographical fiction, her readers could also function as witnesses to a traumatic Oedipal event that cannot be fully grasped by White but which has survived in her texts. Like Clorinda in the symbolic form of a tree, or a psychoanalyst receiving the psychic blows his patient inflicts in the transference situation, wounds in which White’s own voice is paradoxically trapped and released, her protagonists, too, defy and bear witness to an unclaimed experience. On one symbolic level, this is most evident in White’s documentation of her psychosis, which also bears similarities to Tasso’s story. In my interpretation of Tasso’s story, what I find particularly striking is that Tancred’s repetition of the injurious act is carried out in a magic forest; it is in a phantasmagoric landscape that betrays the memory trace of the original act. Trauma can make its presence felt in this more manageable but no less imaginary landscape that is no less than analogous to the psychotic narrative. Similarly, in White’s autobiographical novel, *Beyond the Glass*, it could be argued that White’s voice can be located in her alter-egos’ dreams and hallucinations as wounds that cry out in a retelling of her traumatic encounters with psychosis.

On another, deeper, symbolic level, the parable of Tancred’s situation is somewhat problematic. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes, ‘The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him and what he cannot remember may be the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past’ (39; emphases in original). On the one hand, Caruth’s observations on unclaimed experience in light of Freud’s statement are eloquently explored to illustrate her own argument on memory. On the other hand, Freud’s thinking on sexuality and repression, as opposed to the repression of a traumatic memory that is not sexual, derives from his notion that the repetitive act does not bear resemblance to the original traumatic event because the traumatic event is illusory. It is illusory because of the emphasis Freud places on sexual trauma in his theories, even in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a point to which I shall now turn.

**Maternal Betrayal**

In my reading of Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* cannot be read without paying attention to the dual nature of pleasure and unpleasure with regard to the sexual instincts and how they are connected to the life and death instincts. Initially, Freud is conflicted about how traumatic neuroses can occur outside a sexual framework. On the one hand, Freud makes it very clear in relation to dreams, for example, that ‘it is impossible to classify as wish-fulfilments the dreams … which occur in traumatic neuroses, or the dreams during psycho-analyses which bring to memory the psychical traumas of childhood. They arise, rather, in obedience to the compulsion to repeat’ (61). On the other hand, he states that a traumatic haunting is often manifested through symptoms of the body, which is the classic notion of hysteria as a trauma that is connected to the Oedipus complex: ‘These reproductions, which emerge with such unwished-for exactitude, always have as their subject some portion of infantile sexual life―of the Oedipus complex’ (39). Later, in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940), a work posthumously published after Freud’s death, he again draws the readers’ attention to how the attraction/repulsion principle, which is a key feature of the pleasure/unpleasure symbiotic relationship, results in a paradox: love, for example, is both aggressive and intimate and, of equal importance, is tied to an earlier childhood memory (6). The ambivalent nature of how White’s relationships with her parents and with, for example, the Catholic Church are conveyed in her autobiographical fiction naturally speaks to this Freudian paradox, as illustrated in Chapter Three.

However, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the compulsion to repeat with regard to repressed memories does not come from the unconscious, but from the ego. That being said, the unconscious is the destination of the ego’s desire to repress the memory. It is the ego that represses a traumatic memory because of its need to avoid unpleasure (40-41). Given Freud’s view that a repressed memory in the unconscious will always be transformed or displaced in some form—which, of course, throws into question how truth is generated—the subject cannot ever revisit the earlier traumatic event, even partially in nightmares, as Caruth suggests. Freud writes, ‘anyone who accepts it as something self-evident that their dreams should put them back at night into the situation that caused them to fall ill has misunderstood the nature of dreams’ (31). According to Freud, dreams either acquiesce to his notions on the subject of wish-fulfilment (which he confesses is not always the case, as aforementioned) *or* expose ‘the masochistic trends of the ego’ (31). It may be more apt to say sadomasochistic trend of the ego that readers also witness in Tancred’s wound upon Clorinda.

It is what Freud describes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as an unconscious ‘*passive* experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality’ as someone whose ‘active behaviour’ follows the same course (45). It is a scenario that is analogous to the example he gives of the young child at play whose *fort-da* game, in which he throws a reel of cotton over the end of the cot and then pulls it back into view, symbolises not just the child’s mother going away and the need for her return that, unconsciously, causes the child to perpetuate feeling abandoned, but his impulse to take revenge on his mother for going away: ‘All right, then, go away! I don’t need you. I’m sending you away myself’ (35).

In *Radical Modernism and Sexuality: Freud/Reich/D. H. Lawrence and Beyond* (2005), David Seelow observes that in the *fort-da* game, ‘although the child may be avenging himself on the mother by sending her away, the game’s deeper significance suggests the child’s desire to merge with the mother. The game, on this level, symbolizes a regressive trend apparent even at the age of one-and-a-half’ (42). It is this type of regression to an earlier state that anticipates Otto Rank’s theories on the subject. In his book, *The Trauma of Birth* (1929), Rank seeks to illustrate how the ‘nucleus of the Unconscious’ of mankind’s psychic development is the biological experience of birth and attempts to surmount the trauma of that experience (xxiii-xxiv). His investigation into the trauma of birth began with a realisation that if patients resisted the libido transference associated with the Oedipus complex, this was due to a ‘fixation on the mother’ (4). Although pre-Oedipal attachments of this nature do not break new ground in terms of Freud’s investigation into infantile fixations and the rebirth phantasy at the end of analyses, Rank takes his readers back to the mother’s womb and primal fixations on the mother.

It is in Freud’s example, moreover, where the words ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ are acutely conveyed. ‘Beyond’ does not equate to a theory that puts aside sexual instincts in place of others, i.e., life and death instincts. The word beyond refers to the inclusion of unpleasure in his analysis that is, in my view, just a rewording of his earlier theories on the nature of dreams in relation to sexual anxiety. Exemplified in Freud’s *fort-da* example is the idea of betrayal that is also unconsciously illustrated in Tasso’s story. However, Freud does not articulate either example as testifying to real parental betrayal. Moreover, Freud does not focus on in the *fort-da* game example is how betrayed the child felt upon being abandoned by his mother that is a significant consideration in relation to not just White’s autobiographical fiction, in which there is a sexual obsession with the father but in more contemporary autobiographical fiction and memoirs, too.

In navigating complex feelings for significant others in White’s life, writing autobiographical fiction served two aims: 1) the nature of autobiographical fiction representing the dual facets of attachment (autobiographical elements) and detachment (writing in the third person), correspond to White’s own ambivalent feelings towards her mother; and 2) serves as a method of healing by White portraying her mother as less significant in her life than her father, going so far as to write her out of some of her autobiographical fiction altogether.

White’s sexual obsession with her father—in and out of dream—in which her mother is absent, is the strongest indication of White having felt betrayed because it is to her she wants to develop the strongest emotional union with against a man who may not have physically raped White, but certainly did so on an emotional level, as demonstrated in the previous three chapters. In Freudian theory, it is the child who, driven by instinctive Oedipal impulses, betrays the mother in her turn to the desire for an eroticised relationship with her father for which she will then, and necessarily so, seek punishment: not just on account of how she behaved with her father but how she behaved against her mother. It is a theory that Alice Miller describes in *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society’s Betrayal of the Child* (1981) as ‘poisonous pedagogy’ in which victims of abuse ‘for the sake of survival … will usually make beloved attachment figures seem better than they are and never denigrate them’ (111).[[70]](#footnote-70) In relation to the abuser, this is certainly the case. It is quite often, however, a different matter with regard to the mother.

White felt deeply betrayed by her mother. Christine lost her mother when she was just two-and-a-half months old, so she did not have any maternal influence or model from which to acquire nurturing maternal tendencies. Her father had been raised in a Masonic orphanage and did not display any paternal instincts; rather, he saw his children as a commodity, selling two of Christine’s siblings off as governesses, plus herself, to employers overseas (Dunn 14). While living and working in Austria as a governess, Christine had prided herself on being able to remain slim amidst the mountainous riches of food that reflected in many physiques. Dunn suggests that Christine may have had an eating disorder: ‘powerless and fearful of that powerlessness, she may have exerted her will over the one thing in her power – herself and her body’ (18). To find herself pregnant after marrying Cecil Botting was catastrophic for Christine. One could well imagine how she might have compared the roundness of the woman’s growing belly to the bellies of well-fed middle-class people all around her. Indeed, Christine White was known to be vain; she would take the housekeeping money or from her daughter’s allowance to buy herself something pretty (Dunn 10).

White’s mother never behaved in a way that typifies a ‘good’ mother, one who nurtures her child in a way that produces a socially responsible human being. White and her mother seemed to behave more like peers, playing games, giggling, and neglecting to be a responsible mother in favour of identifying and competing with her daughter instead (20). These strong narcissistic tendencies displayed by Christine can also be seen in White herself. Far from having a pre-Oedipal attachment to her mother, it seemed that this opportunity was not even available to her. Essentially, she had no mother, but a woman who also acted like a child, unwilling to grow up and grow old. This was to last right into her old age, as Christine became more theatrical and increasingly convinced of her own beauty. She also suffered from debilitating depression (21).

White’s relationship with her two daughters continued the pattern of maternal neglect that White experienced in her childhood. In her memoir, *Now To My Mother* (1985), White’s first daughter Susan Chitty recalls how a friend of her mother’s, Joan Robertson, remembered visiting White in hospital after she had given birth to her. A particular statement stayed with Susan: ‘Your mother looked down at you as if you were going to bite her’ (32). Susan displayed intense ambivalence towards her mother, which is particularly evident in her memoir. She recalls an early childhood memory around the age of four of how she would rather be a horse than be herself and would play at being a horse (44). At age nine, Susan confessed to a dream she had that she was particularly proud of: ‘I told her [mummy] how in bed at night I was an ill-treated horse, forced to drag heavy loads up a hill. I was beaten until finally my driver thrust a spiked club up my bottom’ (106). When White asked whether or not this experience was frightening, Susan replied, ‘Yes. But it’s *lovely*’ (106; emphasis in original). This memory eerily resonates with White’s accounts during her descriptions of psychosis in *Beyond the Glass* and a diary entry dated 21 April, 1938. Like her mother and grandmother, Susan suffered from depression. She attempted suicide during her first year at Oxford.

Susan’s childhood, like her mother’s, was one of neglect and cruelty. Susan's nurse (nanny) administered frequent spankings and took one of the daughters out of the nursery whilst leaving the other in it, sometimes for hours at a time. Susan’s mother, in the meantime, was nowhere to be found. When she was around, Susan needed an invite to see her (49). In her desperate need for maternal attention, Susan habitually and ferociously sucked her thumb. Susan recalls how her nurse tried many different things to stop Susan from sucking her thumb, from tying the ‘offending member in a cotton bag’ to coating it in ‘bitter aloes’ (47). Nothing worked.

In *Nothing to Forgive*, Lyndall also describes White as a neglectful mother who did not seem to know who her daughter was ‘because you ignored me in babyhood, terrorized me in childhood, and slighted me in adolescence’ (3). There is a pattern in which history repeats itself. In White's inability to overcome dysfunction in her relationship with her mother, her past is tragically reenacted in her relationships with her daughters.

Lyndall, as well as Susan, attempted to understand why her mother was so neglectful. Lyndall recalls how a pointed statement by her mother had touched a nerve: ‘But it was only when I read the blunt statement “I always resented the birth of my second child” that I realised I had been sentenced to rejection by my mother in her womb’ (15). White admits in a diary entry for her psychoanalyst, Dennis Carroll, on 11 September, 1937, that she ‘literally retained [her] second child and was ill for long after’ because the thought of giving birth was so terrible that ‘I would rather let the child die inside me and die of bloodpoisoning than face it’ (109). It is the same rejection that White had felt by her mother. However, this statement is made in bad taste, with a lack of empathy towards what White’s mother had to endure in childbirth, which further serves to emphasise White's feelings of hostility towards her mother.

White draws a complex relationship between mother and daughter in her autobiographical novels, in which descriptions of neglect, rejection, and revenge are in abundance. As White is nearing death, spending the last moments of her life battling her demons between tears, Lyndall makes an insightful statement that speaks to a life haunted by a contradictory nature and plagued by her traumatic experience at the convent. In tears herself, Lyndall remembers how she

could not assuage her [mother’s] present agony and fear; nor annihilate her past struggles against devastating depression, anxiety and loneliness; not attenuate her dread of what the eternal future held for a Catholic guilty of many sins. I cried for what had been, for what had not been and for what might have been: for the mental suffering her almighty ego had inflicted on herself and others, particularly on her two children. (4) In Chapter 3

White knew that she had been an incompetent mother and certainly felt that she had been a failure as a daughter, but she could not change. In December 1979, towards the end of her life and becoming increasingly fuddled, she feels very isolated: ‘Oh, I want my family close…. If only someone could come in and offer a crumb of consolation! But they don’t’ (Diaries II, 319). The last entry that Susan writes as editor of White’s diaries is ‘Antonia White died on 10 April 1980’ (319). The fact that this diary does not end on a positive note is very telling of the deeply-rooted feelings of betrayal that had been passed down from mother to daughter.

John Bowlby’s work sheds clearer light on mother-child separation than Freudian theory can ever achieve because, instead of viewing childhood sexuality through an examination of adult neuroses thus moving backwards into childhood, Bowlby starts at the other end. In *Attachment and Loss* (1982), Bowlby observes that when a child is separated from its mother, he or she goes through a grieving process that is not recognised as such:

During the phase of despair, which succeeds protest, the child's preoccupation with his missing mother is still evident, though his behaviour suggests increasing hopelessness. The active physical movements diminish or come to an end, and he may cry monotonously or intermittently. He is withdrawn and inactive, makes no demands on people in the environment, and appears to be in a state of deep mourning. This is a quiet stage, and sometimes, clearly erroneously, is presumed to indicate a diminution of distress. Because the child shows more interest in his surroundings, the phase of detachment which sooner or later succeeds protest and despair is often welcomed as a sign of recovery. The child no longer rejects the nurses; he accepts their care and the food and toys they bring, and may even smile and be sociable. To some this change seems satisfactory. When his mother visits, however, it can be seen that all is not well, for there is a striking absence of the behaviour characteristic of the strong attachment normal at this age. So far from greeting his mother he may seem hardly to know her; so far from clinging to her he may remain remote and apathetic; instead of tears there is a listless turning away. He seems to have lost all interest in her. (45-46)

For example, in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a novel that drew upon Allison’s own experience with father-daughter incest (Allison, par. 5), Ruth Anne’s mother hands her off to her Aunt Raylene in order to continue her life with Daddy Glen, the man who beat and sexually abused her daughter. Something inside Ruth Anne dies: ‘I looked back, saw her face pale and drawn, her eyes red-rimmed, her lips trembling. I wanted to tell her lies, tell her that I had never doubted her, that nothing could make any difference to my love for her, but I couldn’t. I had lost my mama. She was a stranger, and I was so old my insides had turned to dust and stone’ (306).

Contemporary clinical literature on trauma has increasingly recognised how betrayal in a child’s early developmental stages plays such a large part in later mental illness, which is a factor in an analysis of White’s psychological plight. In his article, ‘The Recovered Memory Controversy – A New Perspective’ (2008), Graham Gorman cites the abandonment of the mother as the sole cause of repressed memories that are later recovered. Gorman found in a study of 404 subjects that included subjects who experienced recovered traumatic memories and their mothers, in order to corroborate the memories. Gorman proposes that in early childhood, a child’s perceived abandonment by his or her mother ‘forebodes extinction and ensures a traumatic memory trace’ (25). Whilst there is certainly a case for motherly abandonment, Gorman’s method of hypno-regression would be subject to scrutiny, given the controversy dating back to Charcot, Janet, and Freud, which Freud recounts in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). In a particular study in which 42 subjects of childhood sexual abuse recovered memories, all of them recalled during regression that the worst part of it was the acknowledgement of maternal abandonment: ‘*Mother, you cannot love me or you would not have let this happen to me*’ (26; emphasis in original). Trauma, however, was typically below age one, including in the womb. However, of interest, is a case Gorman provides of a thirty-two-year-old woman who had a conscious recollection of being abused, but under hypnosis recovered memories of feeling pleasure by the attention she was receiving from her father, which was ‘compensating for the lack of attention she perceived that mother gave her. The girl felt great guilt over this and could not retain this feeling in consciousness’ (29).

Richard Kluft makes a good observation in his article, ‘Ramifications of Incest’ (2011), which is how betrayal trauma is a situation that ‘encompasses the unique hurt associated with violation by those who have a basic obligation and duty to protect and nurture and extends to those who refuse to believe or help the victim, adding to the victim’s traumatisation. The threat to attachment needs is so profound that the victim may be impelled to disavow the betrayal that he or she has experienced’ (par. 16). Betrayal can also lead to ‘traumatic bonding’ in which negative attention associated with the abuse, like beatings, humiliation, and threats can perversely translate in the victim’s mind as a form of caring (par. 17).

As described by Jennifer Freyd and Pamela Birrell in their book, *Blind to Betrayal: Why We Fool Ourselves We Aren’t Being Fooled* (2013), a fundamental feature of betrayal is fear of losing trust in authoritative figures, which they define as ‘betrayal blindness’ (95). It is ‘based on an extreme need to keep some aspect of a situation intact, whether maintaining a marriage, keeping a family together, or holding onto one’s position in a community. If the marriage, the family, or the community appears necessary for survival, remaining blind to the betrayal is a survival strategy’ which can be achieved through ‘both internal and social processes’ but can also ‘prove toxic to the mind, the body, relationships, and society’ (95).

**Writing Autobiographical Fiction towards Healing**

According to Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), ‘The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation’ (133). It is in these new connections, Herman argues, that a new foundation of trust can be built. I suggest that White’s autobiographical fiction served to help her work through deeply-rooted feelings of betrayal that she examined within the context of her relationships with her parents. Although White was betrayed in very different ways by her parents—by her father in psycho-sexual terms and by her mother’s inability to be a good mother—White’s feelings of betrayal were overtly targeted in many ways at her mother.

In *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing* (2000), Suzette Henke explores life writing as a form of scriptotherapy:

The primary goal of therapy is ‘to put the story, including its imagery, into words’ (Trauma 177). If Herman’s analysis is correct, then a major impetus behind autobiographical literature in general, and women’s life-writing in particular, may be the articulation of a haunting and debilitating emotional crisis that, for the author, borders on the unspeakable. What cannot be uttered might at least be written―cloaked in the mask of fiction or sanctioned by the protective space of iteration that separates the author/narrator from the protagonist/character she or he creates and from the anonymous reader/auditor she or he envisages. (xix)

In White’s case, her autobiographical fiction is a place for her to revisit and work through complex issues of betrayal she had with both her parents as a form of self-expression that, whilst immensely stressful at times and never really fully surmounted, may have been the best type of therapy she sought that prevented her from taking her life.

But, more importantly, writing autobiographical fiction is about writing in one’s voice, even if that voice is marred by an array of complex emotions in an unhealthy relationship. Readers become witnesses to those voices. In *Introducing Narrative Psychology: Self, Trauma and the Construction of Meaning* (2000), Michele L. Crossley observes that ‘We often experience the narratives told by people who have suffered various illnesses and traumas as gripping, emotive and powerful. The power of such stories, according to Frank (1995: 48), derives from the implicit link we make between the “truth” of a story and the suffering attending the telling of that story’ (110). For example, in an interview with Mort Zuckerman on 13 September, 1995, Dorothy Allison talks of how other’s impotence is turned inward: ‘We’re raised to make everyone else’s lives easier, if it’s only by example of how easily we destroy ourselves” (‘Charlie Rose’). To Ruth Anne, it came easily to turn Glen’s hatred of his own self-loathing upon herself: “‘You think you’re so special,” he’d jeered. “Act like you piss rose water and honey.” … I rolled over and pushed my face underwater. I was no Cherokee. I was no warrior. I was nobody special. I was just a girl, scared and angry…. It was like sliding down an endless hole, seeing myself at the bottom, dirty, ragged, poor, stupid’ (209).

Deborah M. Horvitz suggests that metaphorically reenacting trauma in narrative offers the victim a means to healing that serves, as a political statement in itself, to voice a trauma that has been silenced. She argues, ‘Not until the victim encounters and translates her “unspeakable” tragedy into “her” story can she envision a future devoid of violence’ (40). In her reflective essay, ‘History is a Weapon: A Question of Class’ (2008), Dorothy Allison seems to speak to this possible future:

The need to make my world believable to people who have never experienced it is part of why I write fiction. I know that some things must be felt to be understood, that despair, for example, can never be adequately analysed; it must be lived. But if I can write a story that so draws the reader in that she imagines herself like my characters, feels their sense of fear and uncertainty, their hopes and terrors, then I have come closer to knowing myself as real, important as the very people I have always watched with awe. (par. 4)

In ‘Speaking of the Everyday: Psychosis and Writing’ (2005), Brendan Stone observes how everyday writing between psychotic episodes enables people suffering from madness[[71]](#footnote-71) an opportunity to ‘actively’ recast ‘their fragile senses of selfhood’ (170). These writings for the two women writers Stone writes about actually aid in their recovery. Linda Hart writes, for example, ‘Writing this journal has kept me on the edge of sanity. Without it, I believe I would have tipped over into the chasm of madness from where I could not be reached’ (qtd. in Stone 170). This remarkable instance of these writers who ‘counter voicelessness’ as a form of ‘soliloquising’ (170-171) is the very presence of a voice that is equally applicable to the nature of autobiographical fiction, which straddles the border of fiction and autobiography.

What is key to point out is that, whilst White’s life and relations with others were difficult, it is the very act of writing about the self, even when fractured, to be granted an outlet for self-expression. White was an enormously complicated woman. It is not uncommon in autobiographical fiction and memoirs to be the place where feelings of betrayal come to the fore and are worked out. Writing can be revenge and, for some, offer a place of healing, too. In the postscript to *My Father’s House*, Sylvia Fraser writes, ‘In retrospect, I feel about my life the way some people feel about war. If you survive, then it becomes a good war…. Contact with inner pain has immunised me against most petty hurts’ (253). At the end of *Beyond the Glass*, Clara writes, ‘Richard … I’ll hold on … go in peace’ (285). For her, it was about survival, mentally and physically.

Readers learn that ‘It was not until her father was dead that she came to appreciate Christine’s absolute loyalty and non-judgemental acceptance of her daughter’s character and life’ (Dunn 87). The fact that White’s daughters felt the need to write their memoirs to try and come to terms with maternal neglect in their own lives is testimony to White’s inability to develop a true love for herself or others. Instead, she spent her life battling deep ambivalent feelings for her parents, so much so that she also felt the need to revisit her troubled relationships with her parents repeatedly in her autobiographical fiction. It is unclear if White ever truly forgave her parents, but if Lyndall’s memoir title, *Nothing to Forgive*, is anything to go by, she at least did find a way to do that in relation to White.

As shown in this chapter, trends in contemporary thinking about sexual trauma have deviated quite markedly from Freud’s psychoanalytic theories. While many of Freud’s ideas have been discredited, and the damage to the mental health of victims of childhood sexual abuse has been established, there is still a reluctance to address the taboo of father-daughter incest. This is particularly evident in the recovered memory debate. That being said, accurately recovering any traumatic memory is challenging in itself due to an inability to remember the event, either partially or completely, and the need of persons who have experienced trauma to distance themselves from it by way of self-preservation.

But there is a deeper issue to be considered in connecting memory to experience and that is with regard to betrayal, and White’s autobiographical fiction, as it has for other writers, serves as a voice that also makes her feel real. Given the emotional conflicts White experienced in what were extremely damaging relationships with both parents, writing for White was, on the one hand, simply a means of self-preservation and, on the other hand, an act of revenge against her mother in an epic Oedipal narrative that screened deeply-rooted feelings of betrayal. For White, moreover, writing was a coping mechanism against maternal betrayal as psychosis was a defence mechanism against paternal betrayal.

Conclusion

Antonia White’s sequence of autobiographical novels depict a problematic Oedipal relationship between White’s protagonist and her father that speaks to White’s sexual obsession with her father, as described in her diaries. Some of White’s critics suggest that she was probably a victim of father-daughter incest. However, the closest statement White makes that may support this claim is ambiguous: in a diary entry dated 28 June, 1938,Write writes, ‘I couldn’t have had intercourse with [my father] … because presumably apart from morals … he didn’t want it’ (140). On the one hand, readers could interpret this statement to mean that White wanted to engage in sexual relations with her father, but that her father was not interested and proceeded to enforce the incest barrier. On the other hand, this statement also suggests, particularly in the phrase, ‘I couldn’t have had,’ that perhaps White was in denial about a sexual experience she thought may have happened but had not been consciously able to process. It is precisely the ambiguous nature of this statement that opened the floodgates of my examination into the complexities associated with validating sexual abuse in a woman’s history.

When I embarked on this thesis, it was driven by the following question that became the foundation upon which my thesis is built: is White’s autobiographical fiction a viable avenue for the unconscious documentation of sexual trauma? My answer to this question is yes. Does this answer, then, support the conclusion that Antonia White was a victim of father-daughter incest? No, it does not. Through a psychoanalytic lens, my examination of a non-resolved Oedipal trajectory in White’s autobiographical fiction only led to a larger question being raised: what does sexual trauma mean and to whom? My answer exposes a major theoretical conundrum in psychoanalytical concepts of sexual trauma itself, particularly in relation to unconscious sexual wishes and psychosis.

Freud has three general explanations for his interpretation of sexual trauma: 1) it is caused by a female caregiver’s cleansing private areas and breastfeeding; 2) it is caused by a child witnessing or believing to have witnessed the primal scene; and 3) it is caused by the child’s desire to subject itself to sexual trauma by his or her engagement in incestuous Oedipal fantasies. The anxiety that can ensue from the latter explanation can lead to psychosis. Within the context of Freud’s Oedipus complex theory specifically, sexual trauma has a singular meaning: it is a necessary part of a child’s psycho-sexual development. Through a series of psycho-sexual stages, the child’s personality transforms from being driven by the pleasure principle, which is unconsciously aroused by the female caregiver, typically the mother, to the introjection of society’s successful construction of the incest barrier through the father. In White’s protagonist’s case, however, the ideal social outcome is not achieved due to scenes of paternal seduction, which are either directly stated in dialogue or implied in dreams.

Whilst this information alone is not grounds to speculate upon the possibility that White was sexually abused by her father, what also emerges from my analysis of how White represents her relationship with him in her autobiographical fiction is an aporia in Freud’s Oedipus complex theory. He suggests that a little girl’s unconscious incestuous desires are unconsciously initiated by her father, but curbed by his super-ego; it is an idea in contrast to the father’s role as enforcer of the incest barrier. With the presentation of these contradictory ideas, the premise that the Oedipus complex as society’s defence against the child’s primitive sexual instincts becomes unstable. Nonetheless, this did not stop Freud’s theory from taking hold in psychoanalytic circles and the development of new psychoanalytic theories in relation to girls acting out their Oedipal desires on defenceless fathers.

What came out of my initial investigation into sexual trauma was how differently sexual trauma is interpreted in psychoanalytic theory. For instance, in contrast to Freud’s position on a woman’s psychosis being the result of failure to navigate the Oedipus complex due to unfulfilled sexual wishes, Sándor Ferenczi’s interpretation of sexual trauma is based on real incidences of deliberate sexual abuse in which a descent into psychosis acts as a defence mechanism against acknowledgement of that abuse. This split in viewpoint reflects how Freud and Ferenczi differed in their views of women that ultimately informed a divide in how they interpret sexual trauma. Freud perpetuated a derogatory view on women’s sexuality that closely aligned itself with larger religio-cultural views of women; this is evidenced by the lower value he placed on women compared to their male counterparts, not just biologically and socially, but also morally. In contrast, Ferenczi believed his patients’ claims of sexual abuse, which suggests he placed greater value on a woman’s sense of integrity. These differences of interpretation lay a foundation upon which many theories on sexual trauma rest today, with empirical evidence being provided that speaks to either Freud’s or Ferenczi’s original claims.

Whilst my focus in this thesis has been primarily on father-daughter incest, feminists’ studies on the debilitating impact of sexual abuse, in general, do not take into consideration the fact that boys are also victims. Given this knowledge, female sexual abuse within what many feminists perceive to be a despotic patriarchal framework suddenly becomes a lot more complex. Certainly, when White was writing, women did not have the societal privileges they have today (even though there is room for improvement), but how does male sexual abuse become a political statement about how boys and men become subservient to members of their own sex? Whilst outside of the scope of this thesis, this is a question that needs further investigation, and one that I am interested in pursuing in further studies on the topic of sexual trauma.

Validating allegations of sexual abuse is not easy. Some allegations result in convictions, and some do not. Most victims do not report the sexual abuse until years, sometimes decades later, and many victims do not speak out at all due to the shame they feel or because the event was so traumatic, they repressed the memory. In most cases, sexual abuse has debilitating psychological effects, in which it is not uncommon for victims to descend into the depths of depression, dissociate from their experiences, partially or completely, with some seeing suicide as their only way out.

Although White’s descent into psychosis against a backdrop of a complicated and highly charged sexual relationship with her father may actually serve to evidence father-daughter incest, it cannot be proven. This is not because I cannot corroborate her evidence as a result of recovered memories. She does not have any of which to speak. If she did, they were burned in her diaries written before 1926. It is simply due to the fact that White’s traumatic experiences were documented in a genre that itself blurs the lines between reality and fiction. To complicate the discussion further, White also documents her experience with psychosis, which comes with its own set of problems in relation to authenticity. To what extent can readers authenticate White’s traumatic experiences? On one level, in a discussion of author-protagonist relations, memory, and writing within the confines of a Freudian Oedipal drama, authenticity is problematic due to the ambiguous nature of autobiographical fiction. However, on a deeper level, I emphasise the need for White’s traumatic experiences of psychosis to be appreciated for the emotional impact they had on her, no matter how these experiences are conveyed in her autobiographical fiction and regardless of whether it can be proven that she engaged in father-daughter incestuous relations. I had already established the fact that I was restricted in being able to prove that White was a victim of sexual abuse.

However, out of my examination of sexual trauma came a new consideration that exposed a major failing in a fundamental feature of Freudian theories on child-parent relations, and that was in the area of betrayal, which led me to propose a new way of reading autobiographical fiction that deals with traumatic subject matter. It was through an examination of Freud’s conclusion drawn from his *fort-da* game in light of Caruth’s interpretation of his theories on repetition-compulsion from combined epistemological and ontological angles that I discovered a narrative that was being written alongside an Oedipal trajectory. It was a pre-Oedipal narrative. In Freudian terms, the pre-Oedipal narrative leads to the child entering the Oedipus complex proper. Klein deviated from Freud’s view by suggesting that not only does the Oedipus complex start much earlier than he proposes, but the pre-Oedipal portion actually does not disappear at all; it continues during a person’s life. Nonetheless, I had to focus on father-daughter relations first in order to come to the realisation that what I was reading went much deeper than a problematic Oedipal drama. I was reading a series of autobiographical novels driven by deep-rooted feelings of maternal betrayal that White needed to work through by writing her autobiographical fiction. This is a common thread I found in other works by authors like Dorothy Allison, who ends her book with a reference to her mother, as does Sylvia Fraser, even though both writers, like White, seem to focus on father-daughter relations with a largely absent mother. For White, through her father’s religious conversion, her own mother became replaced by nuns, which further highlights the betrayal she felt by her mother for neglecting her at a time when she was navigating being accused of spiritual betrayal by her father and the Catholic Church.

White’s attachment to her father was also an act of revenge against a mother by whom she felt abandoned. However, should the blame rest on the child for this, a position to which Freudian theory subscribes? No, the blame rests firmly on the shoulders of her parents. White’s struggle with writing was a manifestation of her relationships with her parents. When she wrote, she felt in control and yet the subject matter by which she was obsessed through her out of control. Writing was a way to work through trauma, a release from trauma, and yet took her into the belly of her trauma. It was exhilarating and yet painful, a place to sever relationships and yet a place to renew connections. And yet, White died a tormented woman, feeling abandoned and still wrapped up in her own needs and desires that had never truly been fulfilled at the crucial time that it mattered – in those early years of childhood with her mother. Since John Bowlby himself shifted emphasis from childhood betrayal to parental betrayal, literature has increasingly recognised the damaging impact of maternal neglect on a child’s future. In White’s case, she was, of course, betrayed by both parents, just in very different ways.

White’s life was traumatic, and even though I cannot testify to her being the victim of sexual abuse, what needs to clear in literary and psychoanalytical / psychological circles today—and what I hoped to achieve in this thesis—is the fog of scepticism that pervades an analysis of women in crisis who have no other way to engage with their crises, whether consciously or unconsciously, than through a creative outlet in the form of autobiographical fiction, because this form symbolises the struggle White had writing about personal experiences but also needing to detach herself from them. Ultimately, White’s autobiographical fiction deserves to be read with respect, integrity, and a willingness to listen to a wounded voice.

Afterword

My own relationship with White’s life and writings has been an interesting one. After reading her autobiographical fiction, I was impressed by her talent as an artist and her ability to write about personal experiences in a way that did not detract from aesthetic values. Beyond her work, White was a fascinating and complicated woman. In her youth, she hob-knobbed with the likes of T. S. Eliot, Bertrand Russell, and Djuna Barnes. She was an intelligent, witty, and charismatic woman who had a string of admirers. Besides being a writer, at different stages of her life, White was an actress, copywriter, journalist, editor, and translator. She was also a wife to several men, had a female lover, was a mother to two daughters, and dated men her age, much older, and some much younger, too, which included dating brothers. White was not a woman bothered by how others perceived her.   
 White lived a life between extremes: she was, literally and metaphorically, either living life to its fullest or wallowing on the fringes of poverty. Whilst reading her writings, my feelings oscillated between admiration, disgust, empathy, and pity. White was self-absorbed, selfish, and vain. She was not backwards in writing about all aspects of the sordid side of her life from masturbatory habits and sexual obsessions to gossip, complaints, and dreams of stardom. But there was also a lot of introspection.

Through my research into White, doors opened into much larger discoveries on the complexities of personality and relationships, mental illness, socio-cultural values, female sexuality, and trauma. White is one of the most remarkable women writers I have had the privilege to be able to research and write about. 63, 552 words

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1. 1. ‘The Analytic Conception of the Psycho-Neuroses’. 1908. *Further Contributions to the Theory and Technique of Psychoanalysis*. London: Read Books, 2013. 23. Print.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Faraway Nearby*. New York: Viking, 2013.3. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Qtd. in Leigh Gilmore’s ‘Bastard Testimony’. *The Limits of Autobiography*. NY: Cornell, 2001. 63. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This period is situated between the dissolution of the Oedipus complex following the phallic phase (around age five or six) and puberty. It is a period that transitions the young child from unconscious sexual desires for its parents to socio-cultural identifications with the parents as a result of an intensified repression of the earlier years to the point of complete forgetfulness. This period also marks the onset of sublimations in which a previous sexual aim is redirected to seemingly non-sexual activities, but which themselves symbolise the sexual aim, e.g., artistic creations. However, the Oedipus complex is revived at the onset of puberty, at which point the young girl transfers her unconscious sexual desires for her father into a similar love object-choice who will become her husband. A problem arises if that young girl does not make this shift because her unconscious sexual desires for her father have not been surmounted. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My understanding of the word psychosis that informs Chapter One is taken from the DSM-IV definition in narrow and broad terms, as noted by Onno Van der Hart *et al*. in *The Haunted Self: Structural Dissociation and the Treatment of Chronic Traumatisation* (2006), based on Pierre Janet’s earlier observations: ‘psychotic symptoms include delusions and prominent hallucinations, with hallucinations occurring in the absence of insight into their pathological nature. A less restrictive definition of psychosis includes prominent hallucinations that the individual recognises as hallucinatory experiences. A definition that is still broader includes positive symptoms of schizophrenia such as disorganized speech, and grossly disorganized or catatonic behaviors.… Most studies are not clear on whether such psychotic symptoms or disorders have a dissociative basis or not. We propose that in most traumatised patients, these symptoms are indicative of structural dissociation’ (119-120). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I write autobiographical fiction in place of autobiographical novels in this instance because White also wrote a short story that describes her descent into psychosis. In general, I prefer to use the term autobiographical fiction as a reference to that genre instead of autobiographical novel, a term that Philippe Lejeune uses in *On Autobiography* (1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. White’s protagonist’s name in *Frost in May* is Nanda. She changes the name to Clara in the following autobiographical novels. The identity, however, is the same. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I use the term ‘authenticity’ with regard to the question of authorial narrative reliability in telling an objective truth. I do not use the term ‘truth telling’ (Gilmore 25) or ‘claims to truth’ (Eakin 20) as alternatives because these terms focus on the conscious decision to lie while making a claim to truth in autobiographical narratives. I base the term authenticity on how Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010) interpret the context in which it should be framed. They do not disagree that distinguishing between truth and lying is not a consideration, about which I agree, but they also stretch the term beyond addressing simple objective truth: ‘How does the narrator authenticate certain truth claims or justify writing and publicising a personal story? What kinds of authority does that evidence carry? That of personal memory? Dreams? Religious visitations? The testimony of others?’ (242). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I agree that Lacan fits into this category to a point, but I would argue that he straddles formalist, structuralist, and post-structuralist ideas because, as in the former two movements, Lacan did advocate for a scientific analyses of texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I do not intend to go into a philosophical discussion of the nature of being, but as a mere point of reference, my intent here aligns itself with the views of Søren Kierkegaard, who, in *Johannes Climacus* (1842/1985), addresses the nature of scepticism as a quality that can only lead in one direction: to a devaluation of meaning in one’s life. I would add that a devaluation of meaning in other’s lives leads in the same direction. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It is not my intention to personally attack Catholicism as a despotic patriarchal authority more so than any other such religious organisation. It just so happens that the Catholic Church was a major influence in White’s life. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) added PTSD to the third edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III). That being said, it isn’t the first time that severe psychological reactions to an event, like war, have been identified. Terms like shell-shock, shock theory, and war neuroses have been around since WWI, e.g. in Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and Karl Abraham, Sándor Ferenczi, Ernst Simmel and Ernest Jones’s paper, *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses (1921).*

    According to the fourth edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR)(1), ‘Diagnostic criteria for PTSD include a history of exposure to a traumatic event that is actual or threatened meeting two criteria and symptoms from each of three symptom clusters: intrusive recollections, avoidant/numbing symptoms, and hyper-arousal symptoms. A fifth criterion concerns duration of symptoms and a sixth assesses functioning’ (National Center for PTSD, par. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I mention this scenario briefly here because I return to *Frost in May* in more depth in Chapter Three in my analysis of larger socio-cultural issues with regard to sexual transgression, Freud’s incest barrier, and Catholic tenets on sexuality. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I use this term, which is similar to the term contradiction, to suggest that beyond being just a contradiction, there is a problem in determining Freud’s theoretical truths when presented with two incompatible views that only serve to create doubt in either theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In a diary entry dated 26 July, 1932, under the heading, ‘A Revision of the Oedipus Complex’ in *The Clinical Diary of Sándor Ferenczi* (1995), Sándor Ferenczi describes a case in which a little girl’s Oedipal incestuous desires are initiated by the father, which causes her to have an unnatural incestuous fixation on him. In this particular case, the girl’s father was feeling unhappy in his relationship with the mother and sought comfort in his daughter, going so far as to gaze passionately at her and get into her bed at night. With regard to the gaze, Ferenczi states that it is a ‘shock’ to the child, who can either ‘perish for lack of love’ or ‘adapt … to the wishes of the attacker’ (175). This girl’s father would also send her mixed messages. After her mother left, the father stressed that she was now the head of the household in place of her mother and that he can sleep in her bed but that she was not to be sexual. In this case, Ferenczi observes that the little girl’s ‘incestuous fixation does not appear as a natural product of development but rather is implanted in the psyche from the outside, that is to say, is a product of the superego’ (175). In other words, Freud’s incest barrier inhibits the little girl’s transference of her Oedipal incestuous desires onto an acceptable external love object in place of her father (175). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jane Dunn makes this observation but not of its presence in *The Lost Traveller*. In Dunn’s *Antonia White: A Life*, ‘hell’ is written as ‘Hell’ (18). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This is a scene I address in my paper, “‘A Conspiracy of Twos”: Sexual Trauma in Antonia White’s Autobiographical Novels Using Freudian Theory’ (21-22). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This incident is purely fictional but serves to aid in forthcoming analyses of interior characterisations. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Electra complex refers to Jung's version of Freud's Oedipus complex as it pertains to the little girl. Jung coined the term Electra-complex in *The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (1915): ‘Electra took revenge on her mother for the murder of her husband, because that mother had robbed her of her husband’ (69). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. A similar situation is given in ‘Femininity’ (1933), 155-156. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. **Jeanne Flood makes an interesting observation that Archie’s own impotence ‘makes him most suitable as Clara's husband, for the object of her marriage is to preserve her Oedipal ties to her father and to expiate her crime of boy-killing. Thus Clara sees her marriage as an act that restores her to her father’ (141). Indeed, it seems that by marrying Archie, Clara also gains a brother: ‘in marrying Archie she had perhaps made up to [her father] for all the times she had disappointed him in the past ... henceforth the three of them were bound in a new tie from which her mother was excluded. She thought how passionately Claude had wanted a son; how passionately she had wanted a brother’ (*The Sugar House* 128).** [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Note that *An Autobiographical Study* (1925) also addresses this on pages 20, 44, and 54. In this work, flight into psychosis was also known in more general terms as a ‘flight into illness’ (59). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Although this was certainly the case in 1893, by 1889, Freud was becoming increasingly sceptical of inducing hypnoid states due to the problem attached to ideas of suggestion, as expressed in *Studies on Hysteria* (138-139). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The wording in my *Studies of Hysteria* edition is: ‘a tendency to such a dissociation, and with it the emergence of abnormal states of consciousness … is the basic phenomenon of this neurosis’ (46). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Interestingly, Ferenczi does not broach the subject of sexual trauma until six pages into his paper, which then begins with the following statement ‘Now allow me to report on some new ideas ...’ (161). This suggests that Ferenczi is aware of the delicate nature of broaching the subject of sexual trauma in a psychoanalytic forum that had already supported Freud’s decision to denounce his seduction theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In ‘On the Definition of Introjection’ (1912), Ferenczi writes that introjection is when an ‘object love’ is ‘an extension of the ego’ (316). This means that should an object of love feel pain, the person who has introjected his or her love object will feel the same pain; this is an act of transference (317). By Ferenczi’s rationale, introjection also extends to the love object having feelings of love, as illustrated in ‘Confusion of Tongues’ (1933). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See footnote to ‘Confusion of Tongues’, 156. In *The Secret Ring: Freud’s Inner Circle and the Politics of Psycho-analysis*, Phyllis Grosskurth also observes that ‘Ferenczi was grateful when Jones agreed to publish it in the International Journal (213). The fact that ‘Confusion of Tongues’ is dated 1933 and not 1949 suggests that it was published during the earlier year. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. From *On Autobiography* (1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. A seemingly insoluble problem. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. From *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Most literary criticism in the first half of the twentieth century engaged with poetic works, but the criticism on the depiction of personality and experience can be applied to any literary genre. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. The debate on mimesis goes back to Book X of Plato’s *Republic* and the artist’s moral obligation to produce works that aspire to impart justice and virtue into the hearts of men. In his debate with Glaucon, the speaker Socrates explains that the poet imitates the appearance of an imitation of an object, which is inferior to cognition of the object itself as a source of understanding. The imitated object, therefore, is not to be taken as a bearer of truth. What the reader needs to guard against is the potential corrupting influence of art, particularly with regard to virtue. The flaw, according to Socrates, lies not in art itself but in man’s mistaken responses to it: ‘Poetry, such as we have described, is not to be regarded seriously as attaining to the truth; and he who listens to her, fearing for the safety of the city which is within him, should be on his guard against her seductions and make our words his law’ (qtd. in Richter 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Although primarily a movement associated with American literary criticism between the 1920s and 1960s, its presence was felt in Britain in the works of, for example, F. R. Leavis. As expressed in *The Great Tradition* (1948), Leavis stresses the centrality of rigorous critical analysis, but he urges this not simply for technical or aesthetic reasons but because it has the closest relevance to the spiritual crisis of modern civilization and the need to withstand a rapidly growing mechanised and commercialised society. Artists ‘not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but … they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life’ (603). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Although the New Critics are often perceived as creating a new form of literary criticism, I would like to stress that this is not strictly true. Besides, for example, Eliot’s literary influences from the Renaissance period, in ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*’* (1864), Matthew Arnold already posited a reactionary view to the Romantics’ one. He viewed literary criticism as a conservative socializing force in a world of declining religious belief. Contact with the finest specimens of arts and letters would bring humanity together in a system of values that could transcend the interests of self and class into ‘its best spiritual work; which is to keep man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarising, to lead him towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things’ (404). It is this trend away from what is, as implied in his statement, the egotistical self that informed the major figures in both literary and psychoanalytic circles in the early to mid-1900s. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Woolf does, however, later provide a contradictory remark: ‘fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners … when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle , one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in’ (qtd. In Burke 200). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. By the 1960s, questions of the author function became a central feature in literary criticism that was to lay a path for movements in reader response, feminist criticism, and gender politics. In *Criticism & Truth* (1966), for example, Roland Barthes is conflicted about how readers should approach a text: ‘It is true that reading a work should be done at the level of the work; but … one cannot see how, once the forms have been laid down, one could avoid finding content, which comes from history or the psyche, in short from that “*elsewhere*”’ (54; emphasis in original). Later, in works such as ‘Death of the Author’ (1967), he advocates for readers’ interpretative strategies to defy attaching singular meanings to the text once the ‘author has been found’ (para. 7), which led to his deconstruction of ambiguity itself in *Image – Music - Text* (1977). By 1980, with his publication of *The Preparation of the Novel*, however, Barthes was gaining a deeper appreciation of the author-function. In a classroom session on January 19, 1980, in an attack essentially on structuralist thinking upon reflection of ‘Death of the Author’, he writes, ‘Neocriticism repressed the author, or at least deprived him of consciousness; the opening paragraph of a little book by Bellemin-Noël testifies to this: “Everything […] comes out of a lack of curiosity with regard to authors. For me, this is of the order of fact, I am not touched, drawn to, even less am I mobilised by the lives or the personalities of the writers…”; a good quote (even if today I take the completely opposite view) because it uses the right expression: lack of curiousity with regard to the author → Death, Lack of Curiousity → return of the author’ (‘The Work as Will’, 208). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud states that the latent content of the dream is the interpretation of the dream once its mask has been removed, and the manifest content of the dream is what one is made privy to (140). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. In contrast, in his essay, ‘Psychology and Literature’ (1933), the same year in which *Frost in May* is published, Carl Jung reinforces T. S. Eliot’s notion, which became a modernist mindset, by stating that a great work of art ‘draws its strength from the life of mankind, and we completely miss its meaning if we try to derive it from personal factors’ (98). This view is central to Jung’s position on the collective unconscious, which is a creative act made conscious for the benefit of touching the souls of mankind in an informative and didactic manner. According to Jung, ‘the artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realise its purposes through him … a “collective man”, a vehicle and moulder of the unconscious psychic life of mankind’ (101). As Jung was to shortly thereafter describe in ‘Ulysses: A Monologue’ (1934), ‘what frees the prisoner of a system is an “objective” recognition of the world and of his own nature’ (121). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. I draw on this description in ‘The House of Clouds’ (41) as a lead-in to Freud’s theory on paranoia to set up the distinction between his theory on sexual trauma and opposing theories provided by, for example, Sándor Ferenczi. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. At this point in time, while Freud has an opinion on psychosis, he does not have much experience with psychotic subjects themselves besides Sergei Pankejeff (the Wolf Man), whom he started treating during his analysis of Schreber’s memoirs. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. At the center of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is the notion that the unconscious is structured like a language. The unconscious, he argues, is not a primitive part of the mind separate from the conscious, linguistic ego, as ego psychologists like Heinz Hartmann would argue, but a formation as complex and structurally sophisticated as consciousness itself. Because the unconscious is structured like a language, however, the self is denied any point of reference to which to be ‘restored’ following, for example, trauma or ‘identity crisis’ (‘The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious’, *Écrits*). In this way, Lacan's thesis of the structurally dynamic unconscious is a challenge to the ego psychology that Freud himself opposed. Furthermore, the ego is also split in Lacanian theory, so one never has a true relation to their ego because it is an illusionary relationship to an ideal image, a product of the unconscious itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. In his medical report for the court in 1902 on Schreber, Dr. Weber gives a detailed synopsis of the characteristics of paranoia that still apply today: ‘It is characteristic of paranoia that delusions develop, frequently in connection with hallucinations and false memories, without the patient’s mood being primarily much affected, soon become fixed and elaborated into a persistent, uncorrected and unassailable delusional system, side by side with the presence of mind, unimpaired memory, orderliness and the logic of thought…. It is characteristic that the center of these delusional ideas is always the patient’s own person, and that usually ideas of influence, particularly of persecution on the one hand and megalomanic ideas on the other combine, and that mostly―at least for some time―the delusional ideas are limited to a definite group of ideas, while other spheres remain relatively intact’ (Schreber 392). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the other/Other is a complex concept. The ‘other’ refers to the self’s perceived specular image, most notably demonstrated in Schema L in relation to his theory on the mirror stage. This is the stage in which the young child identifies with its own specular image (seen in either a mirror or in the parent caring for it). This stage occurs anywhere from six to eighteen months of age. According to Lacan, this act of identification marks the primordial recognition of one's self as ‘I’, situated in what he has termed the imaginary order (relation to the specular ego or ‘imago’). Situated in the symbolic order, which differentiates itself from the imaginary order by a focus on linguistic structures that relate to social laws, as opposed to dual relations, the ‘Other’ denotes the separate subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. In ‘A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis’ (1923), Freud suggests that Schreber’s God was the father-figure who attempts to emasculate him. Schreber could not reconcile this notion with God being all good and consequently fell ill. He translates it as a ‘revolt against castration’ that he must give up in order to recover from his illness, which he does (91-92). This recovery also signifies the transfer from the father-figure perceived as the threatening Devil to the nurturing God that encapsulates earlier Oedipal ambivalences the child feels for the father. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. This is a question I address in my paper, ‘The Paradoxical Notion of Sexuality in Antonia White’s *Frost in May’*. *Clio’s Psyche: Creative Lives Part II: Psychobiographic Approaches* 18.4 (March 2012): 396-400. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Although it is not categorically stated that Cecil Botting belonged to the Church of England before his conversion, I infer this is the case based on his being married in St. Andrew’s Church, Fulham, London, which is a Church of England Parish (Dunn 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Age of entrance and exit differ. In *As Once In May*, White states that she entered Lippington (Convent of the Five Wounds) and the fictional counterpart to the Sacred Heart when she was eight (151). Most sources cite the entrance as being nine and exit being fourteen, given what is written in *Frost in May*. If White left the Sacred Heart on her birthday in 1914, she would have been fifteen, as Dunn observes in *Antonia White: A Life* (46). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. The conger-eel is a predatory eel. Reaching serpent lengths of six-feet, it is known to attack human beings (Enda Dowling, *Irish Independent*, 2013). The allusion to the serpent in Eden is, I suggest, implied in this scene. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. In 1574, although Queen Elizabeth I was tolerant of Catholicism, many of her advisors were not; they condemned as heretics anyone who practiced Catholicism and did not convert to Protestantism. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Puritanism was established by minorities (later associated more commonly with Calvinists) as an activist faction of Protestantism during the reign of Elizabeth I to purify the Church of England of Catholics. At a time when Elizabeth was promoting religious tolerance, Puritanism often clashed with ideals of the Church of England. For more information, a good source is http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Puritanism.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Freud refers to this term as the ideal ego in ‘On Narcissism’ (1914), in which the subject initially displaces his or her self-love and desires onto an external love-object in order to retain an image of a perfect self (94-95). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Sándor Ferenczi is known to have coined the term ‘introjection’ in ‘Introjection and Transference’ (1909). Freud also uses it, namely in ‘Instincts and Their Vicissitudes’ (1915) and ‘Negation’ (1925) where food is used in concrete and symbolic terms to denote the state of pleasure/unpleasure in the oral phase of his or her psycho-sexual development, i.e., consuming what is good and spitting out what is bad. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Refer to *Graceful Exits: Catholic Women and the Art of Departure* by Debra Campbell for an interesting interpretation of Nanda’s transgressions, in which she observes, as I do, that Nanda’s transgressions manifest themselves in friendships and ‘reading and writing forbidden works of literature’ (34). She describes Nanda’s transgression of writing her novel, however, as due to the expulsion of her friend, Monica, after an exercise book filled with dog caricatures was found (36). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. In Michael. J. Lochemes’ *Outline of Catholic Pedagogy*, he documents the consequences of Adam and Eve’s transgression:

    1. The supernatural gifts were taken from man, the natural gifts impaired, the intellect darkened, the will weakened and inclined toward evil.
    2. Man was driven from Paradise and forced to labour and to suffer. After a life of misery came death.
    3. He was sentenced to eternal damnation. (9)

    [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Indeed, even in *Outline of Catholic Pedagogy*, the following statement is made: ‘Pedagogy (from the Greek words *pais* = child, boy, and *agein* = to lead to guide) is a systematic presentation of the principles and rules of education and instruction’ (Lochemes 1). The omission of the word ‘girl’ glaringly depicts Catholic patriarchal values. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Refer to David Seelow’s text for an in-depth socio-medical historical analysis of the shift from Victorian to Modernist ideals on sexuality. His larger focus is on how sexuality was disseminated from the perspective of a Victorian biological paradigm as a scientific extension of abstract religious fears of sexuality to the modernists’ detachment of biological sexuality from its moral context in a radical move towards sexual liberation. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. An interesting background account that informs my assertion here is in ‘The History of Modern Dance’ by Ballet Austin. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. As a result of containing what were perceived as obscenities, *Ulysses* (1922) was banned in the UK until 1930. D. H. Lawrence, with his publication of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), which was banned in the UK until 1960 is, in my opinion, a novel that embraces the spiritual side of sexuality more keenly than any other novel of its type in the English speaking language. One need only turn to the love scenes between Mellors and Constance to be swept up in a torrent of passion, one in which the very beauty of language itself is also elevated: ‘She did not understand the beauty he found in her, through touch upon her living secret body, almost the ecstasy of beauty’ (Lawrence 131). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. I also address this scenario in my paper, ‘“Conspiracy of Twos’: Sexual Trauma in Antonia White’s Autobiographical Novels Using Freudian Theory’. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. This quote also appears in Chapter One, 57-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. As illustrated in Chapter One, White possibly uses her fictional characters to ‘*explain things in daddy*’ (Broe 44; Broe’s emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* primarily goes into great depth about the latency period and its impact on human sexuality, as Strachey observes (180). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. It should come as no surprise that Jones would hold his view, given his own sexual indiscretions, if true, as asserted in Elaine Westerlund’s article, ‘Freud on Sexual Trauma: An Historical Review of Seduction and Betrayal’(306). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. As I observe in Chapter One, Freud’s rationale for making a statement like this is to prove that the child’s original caregivers, typically women, are, as described in the same letter to Fliess, the ‘primary originators’ of sexual trauma (268). Freud is not stating, however, that the sexual abuse was conscious on the part of his caregiver, but an unconscious traumatising factor for the child nonetheless. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Refer to Westerlund’s essay, 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ferenczi admitted to some sexual indiscretions approximately twenty years prior to starting psychoanalysis. In psychoanalytic practice, he was reportedly known to have put his patients on his lap, kiss them, and be kissed by them. Whether this situation was a nurturing one is unclear, although Ferenczi purports that this was the case; this may be so, as it was at this time that Ferenczi took a deeper interest in his patients’ real traumas and began experimenting with mutual psychoanalysis between doctor and patient. Ironically, it was Ernest Jones who severely reprimanded Ferenczi for what he and Freud perceived to be inappropriate sexual activities. Refer to Masson 158-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. This is not mentioned in Westerlund’s essay. Refer to Masson for a detailed account of Robert Fliess’s accusation that his father sexually abused him, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. *Jerusalem Delivered* is an epic poem that recounts the conflict of the first Christian crusade on the Muslims. In this poem, Clorinda is a warrior-maiden fighting on the Muslim side, while Tancred is fighting on the side of the crusaders. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Melanie Klein perpetuates this view in the portrayal of mothers in art by their daughters that is motivated by unconscious feelings of guilt. As I address in my essay, ‘“I Love You; I ‘ate You”: Oral Aggression, Consumed Subjects, and the Creative Impulse in Antonia White’s Autobiographical Novel, *Frost in May*’, although Nanda is ultimately delivered by the nuns to her father at the end of *Frost in May*, as illustrated in the previous chapter, according to Klein in ‘Love, Guilt, and Reparation’ (1937), part of the child’s need to make amends for the apparent sadistic injury it has done to its mother is the need to make sacrifices (311). This idea of reparation is exemplified in the following study illustrated by Klein: the case of Ruth Kjär in ‘Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse’ (1929). After her brother-in-law takes down a picture to sell, Kjär, a woman with no prior painting experience, paints a masterpiece to cover up the empty space on her wall. Karin Michaelis, a friend of Kjär’s, notes how the empty space “seemed to coincide with the empty space within [Kjär]” (215). Klein observes that the empty space relates to the newly-found artist’s own mother, which she goes on to fill with paintings of her relatives, including her own mother represented as almost regal in her magnificence, contrasting starkly with a portrait made prior of an old woman bearing the starkest images of age and disillusionment. Klein notes that the second portrait of the painter’s mother is one of reparation, derived from guilt for harnessing psychological injury projected into the shriveled up portrait earlier conceived. According to Klein, ‘The daughter’s wish to destroy her mother, to see her old, worn out, marred, is the cause of the need to represent her in full possession of her strength and beauty. By so doing the daughter can allay her own anxiety and can endeavor to restore her mother and make her new through the portrait’ (218). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Brendan Stone makes an empathetic judgement to use this term, as opposed to ‘mental illness’, as a way of being sensitive to the branding nature of those suffering from acute distress in a biomedical context (see Notes 175). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)