



Book Review

A Freudian Approach: Disintegration of the Self in *Boy, Snow, Bird* by Helen Oyeyemi

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Book Details

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Author: Helen Oyeyemi

The author is a British novelist and writer of short stories. Since 2014 her home has been in Prague. She wrote her first novel, *The Icarus Girl*, while still at school studying for her A levels at Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School. While studying social and political sciences at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, two of her plays, *Juniper's Whitening* and *Victimese*, were performed by fellow students to critical acclaim and subsequently published by Methuen.

Boy, Snow, Bird, written by one of the most productive British authors, Helen Oyeyemi, and was published in 2014, is a novel which overlaps the fairytale-like narrative technique with a realist approach. Focuses on the themes such as identity, race and gender in her fictional pieces, Helen Oyeyemi, in her much-acclaimed retelling of the fairytale “Snow White,” *Boy, Snow, Bird*, explores the borders of identities of her characters, who struggle with the racial truths as well as the gender roles so as to integrate themselves into the society they live in, through a psychoanalytic implication. Emerges as a result of this integration process to the norms of their spheres, the disintegration of the self of protagonists such as Boy, Snow, Bird and Frances are portrayed in the novel which traces the journey of a white woman, named Boy Novak, from her problematic home in New York City to a new life in the wake of her marriage with a man of African descent. Throughout generations, the skin shade of the family of Boy’s husband, whose name is Arturo Whitman, gets lighter and their race factor unveils itself as a result of the birth of Bird, the daughter of Boy and Arturo, who is actually a widower and has another child, a white-skinned girl named Snow. The initiative point of the novel, the arrival of Bird into the story and the complex net of relations among the family, is a disruptive force. In other words, “she exposes what the extended Whitman... [family] have been hiding, the passing for which Snow is so deeply cherished” (Lau 373). As much a disturber and spoiler within the storyline due to her undeniable colour, Bird is the root of self-interrogation and realization of the self the authoress indicates in *Boy, Snow, Bird*. To display the division and clash between the layers of self within a character, Oyeyemi symbolizes three protagonists, Boy, Snow and Bird, as ego, superego and id, as in the theory of tripartite structure of personality of Freud, at the same time indicating the fact that their unbreakable connection with each other, like ego, superego and id’s bound within a human being, is the essence to balance their identity and that they have to coexist.

Known as the tripartite model, or the structural model, the most famous thesis of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, “divides the psyche into three parts: the id, the ego, and the superego” (Bressler 127) so as to define the unconscious and consciousness, along with the outer agents which have constructive effects upon the mind of a self. Freud calls the id “[the] irrational, instinctual, unknown, and unconscious part of the psyche... [c]ontaining our secret desires, our darkest wishes, and our most intense fears, the id wishes only to fulfil the urges of the pleasure principle” (127). According to him, again, the second notion within the terminology employed to describe the psyche, the ego, is “the rational, logical, waking part of the mind, although many of its activities remain in the unconscious” (127). The third and the last term in the German genius’ structural model, the superego, is usually interpreted as “an internal censor, causing us to make moral judgments in the light of social pressures. In contrast to the id, the superego operates according to the morality principle and serves primarily to protect society and us from the id” (127). Freud argues that it is the ego which functions as a mediator in between our least likeable aspects, namely the id, and the moral compass imposed by the realm outside.

As a representation of the ego both by being the central character of the novel and an in-between person among Bird and Snow, Boy is a woman whose conflicts within her

personality reflect themselves the most. Although she is lacked from the disturbing gaze of the society by having an 'acceptable' complexion and not having any problem in terms of her gender or racial identity, her abnormal name alongside the remnant influences of the oppression her highly problematic mother applied to her during her youth cause for Boy a strong discontent with herself. Relatedly, her perception of the world and the concept of the self differentiates from the mentioned members of the society of Flax Hill, a small town where Boy Novak begins her new life. Boy becomes fixated on mirrors and the mirror image of herself. As it is indicated in the beginning of the novel, she sees "many me's" and, like a fluid entity, her image on the mirror shifts its shape into a troll, a wicked stepmother and most importantly into her biological daughter Bird. While the image of her as something quite ugly as a troll or as an evil mother is justifiable since she goes a bit far to exile Snow and makes her stepdaughter feel like she's "been discarded for another toy [Bird in this case] that was better, more lifelike" (Oyeyemi 231), the reflection of herself as Bird is inexplicable, except for one sense. That is, Boy can see the images within the self of her that signify her id, which means the uncanny, dark, and undesirable parts of her personality, in other words, Bird. No matter how Boy tries to escape from her fears, anxieties and repulsive thoughts that become palpable being in the shape of Bird, she can neither divide and nor throw away, like she cannot get rid of her id, the fact that Bird is a black girl who confronts her family, who live in such a high society as Flax Hill's, with their race.

On the other hand, Boy partly manages to cast off another member of her family who contributes to the symbol of the tripartite model implied in the novel. In a way, she banishes her stepdaughter Snow, who affects Boy like the determinant force of the superego in the construction of the personality. The gaze upon Snow by society comprehends her like the pure and overarching fairness. Described by Oyeyemi within the flow of the novel, "everybody adored Snow and her daintiness" (139). Snow is 'everywhere' like the symbol of morality and the beauty everyone tries to get a piece of. She seems pretty successful in her school and very friendly in her social circle as opposed to Bird. However, both Snow and Bird, similar with Boy, have their own various conflicts within their selves partly because of the racial identity factor. As a matter of fact, along with the race, one of the most crucial conflicts in their selfhoods is the lack of each others in their lives. As the critic Bragg indicates, "[t]he relationship between the two daughters forms a dialectic of visibility and invisibility" (127). They spend their childhood apart because of the intervention of their mother and by the influence of the society the sisterly bond that must exist turns into sisterly rivalry instead. Although it is perceived as the binary opposites by the gaze of the outer world, Flax Hill, Bird and Snow's existence cannot occur separately, like id and superego. They are reflectionless on the mirror because they are the mirrors of each other. One cannot be described without the other. Their identity conflict only stabilizes after they unite and they begin to accept the differences that make up their identity after their personalities are fulfilled by each other's existence. As Bird conveys looking at the mirror when Snow was by her side in the end of the novel, "[the] girls in the mirror had their arms around each other, and they smiled at [Bird and Snow] until [they] followed their lead" (Oyeyemi 265). Through a symbolic narration, Oyeyemi accomplishes to demonstrate the two sisters as complementary in a

way. Boy, or ego in the case of their tripartite relationship, whose function is to balance Bird, id, and Snow, superego, instead of trying to get rid of their shaping effects upon herself, manages to do so finally when she is unburdened of her trauma.

The reason of Boy's trauma and her psychological incapability to accept the fact that she must stay together with her daughters to hold together not only her own but also her daughters' identities, emerge in the shape of her mother who also has a distinct kind of an identity crisis. Toward the end of *Boy, Snow, Bird*, the past of Boy comes off and the reader finally learns that Boy's father "is in fact her mother, who had made the decision to transform herself from Frances to Frank... Although in retrospect, the revelation explains Boy's sense of self-estrangement, the information comes too late in the novel, with too elaborate an exposition of past history" (Christ 524). It unfolds that after undergoing lots of staggering experiences due to her gender identity by the violence of some inhumanely people, Frances, who evolves into Frank, loses the function of the ego within the self. Her selfhood shatters in so many pieces that it neither can control her id and nor be able to digest the superego carved out by whatever society. Gender becomes a conflict rather than an exclamation of her identity. As a result, Frank reflects the repression upon herself into her daughter, causing a chain of suffering which will pass from one generation to the other until the two sisters at the centre of the story become reconciled with each other.

To conclude, *Boy, Snow, Bird* by Helen Oyeyemi manages to demonstrate, with a flowing narration, the interaction between the levels of an individual that make up her/his personality and identity. Through main characters of the novel, Boy, Snow, Bird, and their relationship with each other, Oyeyemi indicates the power and necessity of coexisting for a feeling of content within the self. Each character has very different conflicts since each of their identities are determined distinctly by their environment and their genetics. What can unfasten and balance those conflicts resulted from labels upon identity is that to merge with each other and within the self, as in the end of the novel the protagonists who symbolize ego, id and superego within the realm of magical realism, coexist to show Frances the need of togetherness both inside and outside. To demonstrate this vital message, Oyeyemi "reinvents and uses a fairy tale to intervene in a long discourse about how racism and notions of beauty define some of the more destructive aspects of American culture" (Zipes 168). The authoress exposes the decayedness of society that makes up a tyrant out of Frank, an evil stepmother from Boy, and diffident little girl from Snow. Oyeyemi employs the tool of mirror which the protagonists hold to themselves, as well as to the society, in order to "[call] into question the Ideal-I... as the basis for subjectivity" (Lau 388). Boy, Snow and Bird's yield into disintegration within their relationships and in their own subjectivities at the beginning of the novel come into the picture as the biggest mistake, not to mention its being an efficacious way of self-destruction so as to live integrated with the Flax Hill society that has become "less human so [they] could keep living together" (Oyeyemi 299). Disintegration of what should be bounded by reason of the ideals, or the norms, of a collective unit, as Oyeyemi implies, only makes a person less human.

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