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Searching for Purpose: Silas House's *The Coal Tattoo*

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines *The Coal Tattoo* by Silas House and its focus on psychological self-reflection by its two main characters, Easter and Anneth Sizemore. Anneth, the younger of the sisters, is characterized as a “wild child,” chasing after men and sex in an attempt to discover her identity and fulfill a longing within her that may be too large to satisfy. The Sizemore girls’ mother, Birdie, committed suicide when Anneth was five years old. Through a Lacanian lens, Anneth’s entrance into subjectivity is a violent and incomplete one, which evolves into an incomplete sense of her “imaginary” self and an intensified longing for her real desires while these two warring elements intensely disrupt her sense of existence and placement within the symbolic order. Anneth’s entrance into the symbolic was irreparably disrupted, and she is the picture of social rebellion: multiple marriages, going to bars, underage drinking, smoking, and becoming pregnant. The unhealthy state of her identity manifests itself in a myriad of ways, including psychic restlessness and the intensification of her desire for the Other. Anneth only feels a partial sense of wholeness when she listens to music, using music as an incomplete expression of her desire. Within a Lacanian context, due to the linguistic nature of music, she is incapable of fully articulating desire; however, because music is also non-linguistic, she is able to achieve a partial expression of desire, though she cannot articulate it herself and it cannot be articulated fully even through music.



The Coal Tattoo by Silas House focuses almost completely on psychological self-reflection by its two main characters, Easter and Anneth Sizemore. Anneth, the younger of the sisters, is characterized as a “wild child,” chasing after men and sex in an attempt to discover her identity and fulfill a longing within her that may be too large to satisfy. The Sizemore girls’ mother, Birdie, committed suicide when Anneth was five years old. Anneth characterizes her state of mind by saying that “sometimes I feel so full up of something that I think I’ll bust wide open. Don’t you know how that feels, to want more?” (House 8). Through a Lacanian lens, Anneth’s entrance into subjectivity is a violent and incomplete one, which evolves into an incomplete sense of her “imaginary” self and an intensified longing for her real desires while these two warring elements intensely disrupt her sense of existence and placement within the symbolic order.

A child’s entrance into subjectivity occurs, in a Lacanian sense, when “an individualized identity begins to form quite apart from the child’s parents. This discovery is of crucial importance, for at this time the child notices that he or she is different from the mother, who was the first object of the child’s desire” (Lundell 249). Lacan explains this separation through the visualization of m(Other). A child has no need to utilize language for their desires to be known by their mother, but as the child formulates its own identity separate from the mother during the mirror stage, he is separated from this prelinguistic expression of desire, forever entering into a subjectivity driven by the existence of language. This

desire for the Other exists as an extra-linguistic longing that cannot be satisfied within the bounds of the symbolic. Lacan further develops his theory of psychoanalysis that centers on the psychological development of the individual as a subject of the ideology that they are under, focusing especially on the role of language in this psychological development. According to Lacan, identity is irreparably entered through language, and with this comes the system of deferral of true meaning and the inability to articulate true desire due to the insufficiencies of language. Lacan formulates that what he terms “the mirror stage” fundamentally begins the process of the individual’s identification of themselves as I, stating that “this act [a child looking into a mirror] ... immediately rebounds ... in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates” (1). He continues, “we have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*” (2). Lacan theorizes that the mirror stage allows the individual to take on an identity through viewing their own image and reconciling this image as a marker of identity. This formation of identity through the mirror stage, though triggered by something seemingly mundane, begins the transformation of the individual as they begin to separate their identity from that of their mother. I argue that Anneth’s entrance into subjectivity was irreversibly damaged by the violent nature of the separation with her mother, and that this causes her to be unable to develop her sense of identity. Anneth therefore cannot fully acknowledge the imaginary in order to ascend the symbolic order within subjectivity because her mirror stage was stunted. The imaginary as a unified concept of the self has been shattered, causing her perception of herself as an entire being to be impossibly broken, amplifying the level of her longing for the Lacanian Other as

a method of finding her own identity as well as a place of belonging. Furthermore, Anneth pursues her desires through sex and music, using sex as an attempt to discover the intimacy of the prelinguistic stage that she was never fully able to experience due to both her estrangement and violent separation from her mother and using music as a partial expression of her desire that she herself cannot articulate.

Birdie lost her sanity when Anneth was one, spending the rest of her life locked in her room, “talking to herself, shuffling and reshuffling the stack of postcards that had been Matracia’s prized possessions, singing, dusting her dresser, and remaking her bed dozens of times before she would come out and eat” before committing suicide four years later (House 17). Birdie’s absence occurs before Anneth’s mirror stage and entrance into subjectivity through language, causing Anneth’s identity to form incompletely, for the mirror stage exhibits “a form [that] situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality” (Lacan 2). Put more simply, the mirror stage “is also the point at which the triadic construction of the psyche’s relation to the world is established ... the imaginary is rooted in a unified concept of the self as a whole being made of these different elements” (Lundell 250). Anneth struggles with this reality throughout the novel, as she is unable to express the broken state of her identity. She tries to explain this to her sister, stating, “I’m so sad I don’t think I can stand it,” and “I don’t know what’s wrong with me” (House 50). Anneth’s deepest desire is love, which should have been given to her by her mother, allowing her to properly enter the symbolic through the mirror stage. Due to her mother’s total absence in her life, however, Anneth pursues intimacy through sex and marriages in order to attempt to reconcile her fractured identity, though she does not love any of the men she marries. In the same conversation with Easter, Anneth states, “I know I’ve got

no reason to be unhappy...But somehow I just feel like nobody will ever love me” (House 50). Anneth never truly experienced the prelinguistic object of her desire, causing her entrance into subjectivity to be ruptured and her sense of both identity and awareness of extra-linguistic desire to be disrupted.

Lacan states that “the total form of the body ... symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination,” or, an individual’s sense of singular identity is essentially disrupted by the existence of the body and its disconnection from the mind and psyche (3). Furthermore, Lacan argues that the “total form” of the body “is still pregnant with the correspondences that unite the I with the statue in which the man projects himself, with the phantoms that dominate him, or with the automaton in which ... the world of his own making tends to final completion” (3). In other words, the concept of a “whole identity” is rooted in the unification of the imaginary and the symbolic, but because of the disconnect resulting from bodily existence and subjectivity, the imaginary and the symbolic must remain separate, resulting in extra-linguistic desire that cannot be expressed using embodied functions such as speaking. Lundell further develops this theoretical premise, stating that “the ability to understand and manipulate the relationship between the symbolic and the imaginary is necessary if one is to achieve a healthy and mature adult psyche” (251). This acknowledges that, while a unification of these two aspects of identity is impossible, the relationship can, and must, be controlled in order to develop a healthy sense of personal identity. In Anneth’s case, however, “elements outside of the control of grasp of the subject – that is to say, intrusions or irruptions of the imaginary – play an important role in constituting the symbolic order,” and therefore Anneth’s ruptured entrance into subjectivity has led to “[disrupted] ... development,” or “psychosis or social or aesthetic rebellion” (Lundell 251). Anneth’s entrance into the symbolic was irreparably disrupted, and she is the picture of social rebellion: multiple marriages, going to bars, underage drinking, smoking, and becoming pregnant. The

unhealthy state of her identity manifests itself in a myriad of ways, including psychic restlessness and the intensification of her desire for the Other. Her sister describes it as if “her sister had sucked up some of their mother’s sorrow and carried it around with her. Nothing seemed to help Anneth except, sometimes, Easter’s singing” (House 46).

Easter’s singing helping Anneth exemplifies Anneth’s use of music as a partial expression of her desire and temporary reconciliation of her identity. Anneth only feels a partial sense of wholeness when she listens to music, using music as an incomplete expression of her desire. Within a Lacanian context, due to the linguistic nature of music, she is incapable of fully articulating desire; however, because music is also non-linguistic, she is able to achieve a partial expression of desire, though she cannot articulate it herself and it cannot be articulated fully even through music. She expresses this feeling of unification in a moment of grief over her dead mother, as she “jumped out of her chair and went to her record collection, knowing that music healed her” (House 148). Because of this conflation of her fractured identity and incapability to express her desire, she often attempts to heal her broken psyche through music and sex simultaneously. This occurs most obviously with her first husband, Matthew. During nightly rendezvous, “Anneth would push him aside and turn it up. While she sung he kissed her neck, but she was lost to the music...felt as if she was completely alone in the world” (House 57). Suzanne Cusick expresses this conflation of a search for intimacy and music when she describes a concert: “This music—intimate, alive, in me and around me, was something like noetic union for me, and something like sex” (Peraino and Cusick 862). She goes on to argue that “the relationship between music and sexuality is one of difference in similarity (similarity in difference), in a constant flux that allows each element to remain itself, coexisting with the other in a borderland made of sometimes tense, sometimes joyous relations” (863). To define the relationship between music and sex as one resembling the relationship between the symbolic and the real, regarding the “slipperiness” of the relationship, is

to make sense of Anneth's conflation of the two and her use of them as an attempt to reconcile her identity and her desires.

Sindhurathi Revuluri describes music as "a performed, lived art, with clear bodily connections; as a vehicle to communicate or consummate desire—can act as a powerful, if also conditional, force on the negotiation of identities" (Peraino and Cusick 849). The only way Anneth can express her desire, however incompletely, is through music. Her inability to heal her identity keeps her searching for intimacy and sex as she ultimately attempts to reach a time before her mother's death that never existed as it should have. When Anneth meets Bradley, the only man she ever actually loves, she is unable to express their connection, stating that "there was something that happened between them that she couldn't explain" (House 271). Though Bradley seems to appear as a possible chance to reconcile her identity, their relationship is brief and passionate, as Bradley has been drafted. Despite the impermanent nature of their relationship, he is the only man who Anneth does not avoid true intimacy with through listening to music during sex, for "kissing him was like dancing, like moving to the music" (House 273). By separating the two things that previously characterized her attempts to reconcile her identity and her desire, it is possible for her to achieve partial reconciliation. Bradley helps Anneth understand her fractured identity: "she saw suddenly that she had been afflicted – not only by her blues... but also by a need to feel that she was part of somebody else" (House 272). He also becomes a way for her to partially realize her desire, replacing music in that capacity, for when they have sex "they undressed in the grey shadows of night and did not speak" (House 278). In order to complete the opportunity for Anneth's reconciliation with the symbolic, she even rejects sex as a necessary means of intimacy, for "sex hadn't brought them as close as sleeping together had" (House 279). Anneth is emotionally satisfied by sharing a bed for a purpose outside of sex, momentarily accepting a seemingly less potent form of intimacy that allows her the possibility of reconciling her true desire.

Anneth recognizes the extra-linguistic

components of her and Bradley's relationship, stating that "telling it seemed to lessen the meaning of what she and Bradley had together" (House 281). For a moment, it seems possible for Anneth to reconcile some of her fractured identity. She found something as close to her desire as possible, for her and Bradley's relationship had many non-linguistic elements. Additionally, Anneth no longer has a reason for chasing after sex, for she finds a sense of partial fulfillment and the love she was searching for. This opportunity for change and reconciliation, however, disappears. Anneth decides once again to marry a man she does not love, stating that "she might as well snatch up any love she could get. She thought she could live a lie for the rest of her life ... hadn't her own mother done this?" (House 309). Rather than utilizing the potential for moving forward in a partial reconciliation of her identity, she falls back into the exact same patterns. The reason for this can be seen in the aftermath of her discovering Bradley's likely death, as she dances to music in her apartment and realizes that it does not heal her in the same way it once did. Because Bradley brought her closer to reconciliation than music was able to, music loses its potency to partially express her desire. It is at this moment that she chooses to marry Glenn, a man she does not love and who she even identifies as dangerous. Her reasoning is that "she would never stop loving Bradley, but she had to go forward with her life. If she sat in this apartment and waited on him, she would go mad" (House 312). Anneth refuses to make an effort to find out whether or not Bradley is alive, halting the grieving process in its tracks and putting her in a state of limbo. Rather than accepting the possibility of moving forward in a new awareness of identity, she runs away to get married for the third and final time.

When Anneth marries Glenn, Easter realizes that "her sister had finally turned herself over to that big sadness she had carried around with her all her life. She had lost her mind" (House 315). She is unable to reach a reconciliation of her identity, and when music loses its power for her, she feels hopeless. By reaching the closest point possible within a Lacanian context of realizing her desire, she surrenders to the knowledge that

true healing is impossible. Her despair stems from the awareness that “she feared she would never know ... for certain that what she was doing was what she most wanted to do in her life ... she was positive that such knowledge would never come to her” (House 200). The fracture of her whole identity caused by her disorganized entrance into the mirror stage without the presence of her mother finally overcomes her. She is ultimately unable to reach the imaginary to mend her identity, permanently disturbing her state of existence within the symbolic. Because “the relation of the imaginary to the real must be negotiated through the symbolic, because the real has no ‘place,’” the splintered state of Anneth’s imaginary paired with the Lacanian impossibility of articulating the real, places Anneth in a state of constant dissociation. Anneth’s only comfort throughout her life is music, for it is the only thing that brings her sense of identity close to reconciliation.

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Contributor Bio

Brooke Boling graduated in May 2018 with an undergraduate degree in English and a double concentration in Literature and Writing/Rhetoric. She is currently pursuing her MA in English at the University of Louisville. Her primary areas of research focus within English are psychoanalysis, feminism, 18th/19th century British literature, and 21st century Appalachian literature. She plans to eventually receive a doctoral degree in English literature and join the faculty of a university English department.

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