

Magdalena Łapińska
(Białystok)

(IM)PERFECT MEMORIES
IN JACQUELINE WOODSON'S *ANOTHER BROOKLYN*¹

Abstract

The article entitled "(Im)Perfect Memories in Jacqueline Woodson's *Another Brooklyn*" explores the fallibility of memory as presented in *Another Brooklyn*, a novel by an African American author Jacqueline Woodson. The text presents the idea that personal memories change due to the passage of time along with the new experiences of an individual, and relates it to the studied novel. Special attention is given to different dimensions of grief and loss presented in the analyzed story. The mourning after the loss of loved ones is explored through the use of concepts such as Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief, the selective amnesia and the idea of continuing bonds. The process of growing up is also briefly considered as a mourning process over losing the innocence and safety provided by childhood. Further, the article presents the hardships of growing up without a mother in an unsafe neighbourhood, the loss of vital friendships and the search of a better life - all introduced through the recollections which occurred after a significant passage of time and the accumulation of experiences which lend themselves to the change of the mindset of the main character.

Key words: memory, childhood, grief, death, loss, African American literature

Memories are stored and recalled due to the working of our brains, and although the brain is wonderful and mysterious, as it allows for so many actions, from the simple movements to abstract thinking, it is not infallible when the storing and recalling memories is concerned. Our memories are shaped and re-shaped under the influence of many factors, for instance, the passage of time

¹ This article has received financial support from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education under subsidy granted to the Faculty of Philology, University of Białystok for R&D and related tasks aimed at development of young scientists and Phd students.

and one's personal experiences, and thus they are never truly what one witnessed. Jacqueline Woodson is an African-American author best known for her children and adolescent books such as *Miracle Boys* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Recently, however, she published *Another Brooklyn*, which is classified as an adult novel that deals with the topic of growing up as a girl in Brooklyn of the 1970s. In her new novel Jacqueline Woodson engages the topic of memory and its many aspects. "This is memory" is the chorus which accompanies the reader throughout the story of the tumultuous period in the life of the main character August. The series of memories which present August's time spent in Brooklyn paints the picture of the fallacy of memory and its nostalgic undertone, which together with the portrayal of death and loss are examined in this article through the use of such concepts as five stages of grief, idea of continuing bonds and selective amnesia.

The presentation of the events in the story through the use of memories may prompt the readers into assuming the position where they question the reliability of the narrator and the offered visions of the past. However, the author seems to attempt to counter the dubious reliability of memories by the incorporation of historical events, such as the New York City blackout of 1977, into the backdrop of the story, but because their inclusion is achieved through their remembrance it diminishes the influence they should have.

One can never recall the exact situation they were in, as in order to keep the memory alive in some way "[our] past experiences have been dismantled, analyzed, recollated, and then made ready for imagistic recall."² The further into the past we want to venture with our recollections, the harder it is to remember the seemingly insignificant details which constitute the scene and sometimes even the important elements which stood out at the time the event was taking place may prove difficult to bring back from the depths of memory. "While memory requires time to become what it is – no memory without time, no time without memory – time also hinders memory, veiling its specificities, blurring its details, accentuating too selectively and, in so doing, uncannily rendering the familiar strange."³ People and things one thought to have known completely become more and more foreign the further they are removed from the present, as our memories are modified throughout life. With the passage of time one also

² D. Shields, *Memory*. "A Journal of Literature and Art". No. 46. 2009. p. 34

³ G. Richter, *Acts of Memory and Mourning: Derrida and the Fictions of Anteriority*, in: *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debate*, Eds. Susannah Radstone, Bill Schwarz. New York: Fordham University Press. 2010. p. 150.

possesses more experiences which influence the recollection of the past events. The light shed by the compilation of our experiences may mould the memory of something we thought of as utterly familiar into something we might not even recognize. Attempting to create a story presenting the autobiographical history one always creates a narrative with all the entanglements of the present time, which did not previously exist.⁴ With time the memory is altered: it is no longer the recollection of what was but what it came to mean to the person who remembers it. Although the memory is not truly reliable then, as it becomes too subjective, it becomes an amazing tool for the reexamination of one's life, as Mark Freeman puts it: "the storyteller ... has the opportunity to make sense of things anew."⁵ In *Another Brooklyn* the character seems to exploit the opportunity to make sense of her past which presents itself once she returns to Brooklyn after years of absence.

August returns to Brooklyn because her father is dying: "I had been home a month watching my father die. Death didn't frighten me. Not now. Not anymore. But Brooklyn felt like a stone in my throat."⁶ In the part of the novel that transpires in the present readers are introduced to the main character on the day of her father's funeral. We do not see August despair over her father's passing, in fact if we consider Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief which include denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance,⁷ it seems that August has reached the fifth stage: acceptance. What is more, she seems to acknowledge that death for her father who has been battling cancer, was his final reprieve. "I tried not to think about the return to my father's apartment alone, the deep relief and fear that came with death."⁸ This contrast between being able to bear the death of her father and having difficulty with enduring the stay in Brooklyn seems to show the readers that for August reliving the past brings more torment than going through the pain of grief in the present. This is one of the first signals that August's time spent in Brooklyn while growing up must have been truly traumatic for her. It can also suggest that the act of remembering is difficult because it reminds her that she used to be a member of something that no longer exists – a complete and loving family and a dependable and trustworthy group

⁴ M. Freeman, *Telling Stories: Memory and Narrative*. in: *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debate*, Eds. Susannah Radstone, Bill Schwarz. New York: Fordham University Press. 2010. p. 267.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 275.

⁶ J. Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2017, p. 9.

⁷ E. Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and their own Families*. London, New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 31, 40, 66, 69, 91.

⁸ J. Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*. p. 8

of friends. Remembering means that for the brief instance the person may feel as they did in the moment they are recalling, however, when one stops reminiscing they can either become nostalgic (if the memory was positive) or relieved that the experience is behind them (if it was a negative recollection), as we rarely reminisce about moments which have no emotional entanglement for us.

The death of August's father was not sudden, on the contrary, it was something that both she and her brother had been anticipating for a long time. Her mother's death decades earlier, however, was an unexpected event that no one foresaw. In fact, her death was such a traumatic experience for August that it seems she simply erased it from her memory, at least for some time. Dissociative amnesia caused by a traumatic event is a possible explanation of her missing memories, as the American Psychiatric Association in their fifth edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* distinguishes a selective amnesia in which a person is not able to recall only parts of the certain period in their life that are associated with the traumatic event, which in August's situation would be the death of her mother.⁹ August seemed to have not been able to remember what happened to her mother, she kept telling everyone "*She's coming. I'd say. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.*"¹⁰ Although her amnesia, pertaining to the absence of her mother after the family has moved to Brooklyn, significantly affected her development, the denial she persisted in was also an essential element of her growing up. August, to some degree, seems to be frozen in time - dwelling on the memories of the happy past when all the members of the family were together. She keeps planning for the return of those joyous times: "At night I spoke to my mother, apologized for the lies my father told, [telling people the mother was dead] promised her there'd come a day when he'd be less afraid. He'd take us back to Tennessee then, back to SweetGrove."¹¹ August's plans are impossible to realize, yet she continues to devise them. "[Harvey A.] Kaplan ... called nostalgic personalities 'memory collectors' who long for a past forever lost or a past that never was."¹² To some extent, August can be considered to exhibit some signs of being a 'memory collector', as before she accepts that her mother and the happiness she experienced in SweetGrove

⁹ American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM V)*. Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 298.

¹⁰ J. Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*. p. 15. italics in original.

¹¹ J. Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*. p. 112.

¹² L. Impert, and M. Rubin, *The Mother at the Glen: The Relationship Between Mourning and Nostalgia*, "Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The international Journal of Relational Perspectives" 21: 6, 2011, p. 695.

are irrevocably lost, she continues to yearn for the perfect past which no longer exists and persists in denying that it is gone forever.

Without her mother she appears to feel separated from the rest of her family. "When I watched my brother and father bending toward each other to speak, I'd see their fluid connection, a *something* I was on the outside of. Maybe this was how my mother and I bent into each other. When she returned, we'd bend this way again."¹³ The bond between a parent and a child visible between August's father and brother is missing from her life. She disconnects herself from her blood relatives and continues to live in partial isolation on account of her conviction that her mother will return. As her father and brother find their way to cope with the mother's death through their newly found religion, August persists in her false convictions and finds refuge outside her family. "Somehow, my brother and I grew up motherless yet halfway whole. My brother had the faith my father brought him to, and for a long time, I had Sylvia, Angela and Gigi, the four of us sharing the weight of growing up *Girl* in Brooklyn, as though it was a bag of stones we passed among ourselves saying, *Here. Help me carry this.*"¹⁴ The void created by the mother's death and loss of her love is filled by other kind of love: love of God or love of friends. The burden of growing up in a place where one's morality and safety are in constant jeopardy, which would be lighter with the mother's helpful guidance, is also alleviated by faith in God or sharing it with close friends.

Although the friendships August managed to build after the family has moved to New York helped her navigate the difficulties of becoming an adult without her mother to do so, the friends did not aid her in accepting that the mother will not return. Other people trying to nudge her towards remembering the painful elements of the past with questions "*When did you first realize your mother had actually died?*"¹⁵ did not help her to remember, she would either ignore the question or ask "*Why do you think my mother has died?*"¹⁶ Only after a mother of one of her friends dies, some of the memories come back. "In the near darkness, I saw the roof, Angela's mother curled fetal against the cold. I saw the water. I saw Angela crumbling to the snow-covered ground. I saw my father kissing my mother goodbye, the satin lining her bed, the Bible against

¹³ J. Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*. p. 20. italics in original.

¹⁴ Ibidem, pp. 3–4. italics in original.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 153. italics in original.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 154. italics in original.

her chest, the thin gold band on her too-still finger."¹⁷ Her friend quickly accepts that her mother is dead, although August attempts to draw her into her own denial "*She's not dead*, Angela, I whispered again and again. *Don't believe them*. But Angela wasn't me."¹⁸ Despite the fact that some of the memories came back August persisted in her belief that her mother would return. The complete realization that her mother was gone seemed to have come only when she returned to SweetGrove – the place where the family used to live. "Our land moved in grassy waves toward the water. The land ended at the water. Maybe my mother had forgotten this. And kept on walking."¹⁹ The same way Brooklyn evoked certain memories once August returned to say her final goodbye to her father, coming back to SweetGrove brought the hidden memories to the surface and shattered her denial, so that she finally could bid farewell to her mother and begin to create real plans for the future.

The abruptness of the mother's death seems not to be the only issue concerning her passing that August and the rest of the family had to face. What made the loss even more traumatic was the fact that she had committed suicide. The circumstances surrounding the mother's death are not fully explored, however the statements such as "When you're fifteen, the world collapses in a moment, different from when you're eight and you learn that your mother walked into water – and kept on walking."²⁰ coupled with the picture of the mother's mental state painted through August's memories, allow the reader to assume that she had killed herself.

The mother, just like August, could not deal with losing someone close to her and she persisted in the denial stage of her grief over her brother's death. "My mother said Clyde hadn't died in Vietnam. They had the wrong man. *So many brown and black men, who could know?* my mother said. *It could have been anybody. He told me. Clyde is fine*, my mother said. *He'll be home soon*."²¹ One may feel the continuous connection after a person's death, as the idea of continuing bonds puts forward. "This idea represents recognition that death ends a life, not necessarily a relationship. Rather than 'saying goodbye' or seeking closure, there exists the possibility of the deceased being both present

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 131.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 133. italics in original.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 139.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 150.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 29. italics in original.

and absent."²² Nonetheless, the dead person is present only through our memories and emotions. However, grief and denial experienced by August's mother were so intense that she begun to lose touch with reality and hear her brother talking to her: "*Clyde told me about you being with that woman last night*, my mother said. My uncle Clyde had been dead for almost two years by then."²³ The death of a close person always leaves an emptiness within those who loved them. In "Mourning and Melancholia" Sigmund Freud claimed that "[i]n mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."²⁴ August's mother's grief seemed to have surpassed the usual grieving process and pushed her into a place where the memories could not fill the void left by her brother. Sometimes people may find reprieve from their grief in other aspects of their life, such as religion, work or carrying for one's family, therefore the emptiness they experience is not so overwhelming. At other times, however, the shock and grief that come with death may become too difficult to manage and a person either erases the memory of the death of the loved one, and with it the awareness of that what hurt them, or takes up even more dramatic measures in order to alleviate the pain of grief, for instance suicide. It seems that to some extent the inability to let go of those that are forever gone is passed down through generations in the story, because just as August could not let go of her mother, she in turn could not reconcile herself with her brother's death.

The absence of the mother in August's life prompted her to seek female companionship outside her family. From August's memories readers learn that she found friends who, at least temporarily, became everything to her. Although she remembered how her mother cautioned against putting trust in other women, ("*Don't trust women*, my mother said to me. *Even the ugly ones will take what you thought was yours.*"²⁵) she was so desperate for companionship, that she disregarded those warnings.

For a time, the friendship allowed August to feel safe and loved outside the memories of her early childhood. However, when she and her friends reached

²² C. Hall, *Beyond Kübler-Ross: Recent developments in our understanding of grief and bereavement*. "InPsych" 33.6, 2011, www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/2011/december/hall/ [25.11.2017].

²³ J. Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*. p. 41 italics in original.

²⁴ S. Freud, 1917. *Mourning and Melancholia*. in: *The Complete Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 14. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. 1957 Rpt. in *On Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia"*. 2009. p. 22.

²⁵ J. Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*. p. 41. italics in original.

puberty people began to treat them differently and their attitude towards each other also altered. "Summer came again and men and boys were everywhere, feathery hands on our backsides in crowds, eyes falling too long at our chests, whispers into our ears as we passed strangers. Promises – of things they could do to us, with us, for us."²⁶ The girls had to face dangerous situations that seemed to have been lurking everywhere: "There were men inside darkened hallways, around street corners, behind draped windows, waiting to grab us, feel us, unzip their pants to offer us a glimpse"²⁷ but they helped one another to avoid the unsafe locations and the unwanted advances. However, as the time passed and as some of them began to show interest in those advances, the friendship and the other girls became unimportant. Hurting your friend became something you do in order to be with a popular boy: "*It's crazy*, Sylvia said. *The way this me-and-Jerome thing happened. Don't be mad. You guys broke up. I was gonna tell you. What about law?* I wanted to ask. *What about your father?* The question vast as the silence between us: *What about me?*"²⁸ The want for popularity and the peer pressure change the girls and they forget about wanting to escape Brooklyn, giving up on the dream of living in a different place, a place where there is no fear of tomorrow, a place where young girls can walk the streets safely without the fear of being hurt, a place which was everyone's dream: "Everywhere we looked, we saw the people trying to dream themselves out. As though there was someplace other than this place. As though there was another Brooklyn."²⁹ One could imagine that the way August was treated by her friends and their betrayal of their joined dream of escaping Brooklyn coupled with all the injustice life has put her through might have not only hurt her, but also might have angered her. Paul Ekman writes when discussing emotions that "[a]nger motivates us to try to change the world, to bring about social justice, to fight for human rights."³⁰ It might be that August experienced at least a spark of anger, which fueled the need of changing her life and her pursuit of a better existence that Brooklyn had to offer, which happened subsequently.

One could consider the described process of growing up to be a kind of mourning narrative. The girls mourn their loss of innocence caused by the sexu-

²⁶ Ibidem, pp. 114–115.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 74.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 150. italics in original.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 77.

³⁰ P. Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life*, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2003, p. 42.

al awakening and their ruined friendships, through experiencing different stages of grief beginning with denial (when they help each other to repel the unwanted advances and attempt to keep their relations unchanged, not acknowledging that they have already been altered) and ending with acceptance, which for each comes at different point in their lives.

Growing up in Brooklyn changed the girls, as all of them dealt differently with losing their innocence and the security that the childhood had provided them. Some of them never achieved their dream of yearning for a different life that the place they grew up in had to offer – they lost sight of what might be. Those girls gave in to the ever-present peer pressure, settled for what they had within reach at the time and became adolescent mothers, which cemented their previous life choices and lead to an existence which they previously believed to be beneath them. Some, like August, managed not to be weighed down by their surroundings or the strain of the past, persisted in their pursuit of the dream of a better future and succeeded in creating their own *Another Brooklyn*. One of them, however, did not manage to go through the process of growing up in Brooklyn victorious and did not have an opportunity to create any kind of life for herself. Due to the sexual assaults and the mounting continuous disappointments of life Gigi committed suicide. It seems that she did not want to consent to further violations and acts of disrespect, and the only escape out of Brooklyn she could find was death. Although death ended Gigi's pain it brought more of it for her friends.

The events in the novel are told through the memories which withstood the test of time and still remain. The memories that August allows the readers to glimpse into reveal the hardships of growing up and failed relationships. They tell us that the current associations do not stand a chance against the haunting presence of past failures and betrayals. Even though one might attempt to start over, just as August seemed to have rebuilt her life after her friends' betrayals and disappointments – the process that readers are not given to witness, but are just made aware of – the past leaves a mark on one's psyche, the memories of the traumas of the past cast shadows on you while you try to stand in the sun and be happy. Although August succeeded in creating a good life for herself: being Ivy League educated and travelling the world, she would not create new lasting relationships after the failures of the past friendships and the experienced pain of losing loved ones. Dealing with deaths at an early age and during adolescence (suicides of her mother and her friend Gigi) strongly affected August. Even though she managed to escape Brooklyn, where everything

evoked memories of different kinds of loss, it seems that death became a fixture in her life: she dedicated herself to exploring its meaning, something she could not grasp while growing up. "When I stepped off the bus in Providence, Rhode Island, I was alone. I had wanted this – to step outside of Brooklyn on my own, no past, just the now and the future. ... *My name is Auggie. I'm here because even when I was a kid, I wanted a deeper understanding of death and dying.*"³¹ With time, death which used to be strange and scary became familiar to her.

As a child, ... I had not known that you could spend your days on planes, moving through the world, studying death, your whole life before this life an unanswered question ... finally answered. I had seen death in Indonesia and Korea. Death in Mauritania and Mongolia. ... Death didn't frighten me. Not now. Not anymore.³²

The experiences of dissecting death in order to unlock its mysteries and exploring how different cultures approach death allowed August to let go of the fear and pain connected with it. However, she could not overcome other painful ordeals of her past in the same manner.

The chorus "This is memory." seems to reappear throughout the novel to remind the character, as well as the readers, that the presented events are memories – both perfect and imperfect at the same time. They are imperfect because they are coloured by all the events that followed them thus they do not present the events as they were. They present an imperfect life: full of fear, pain and disappointment. They are also perfect, in the sense that they are clear visions of what the past events mean to the person right now, what they became once certain point in the past and all that is between then and now came together. Past is a place where everything is possible by way of reinterpretation, therefore the imperfect moments may become perfect through the elapse of time and the alteration of our remembrance of them, or perfect moments may be warped by the information and experiences one acquires afterwards.

Bibliography

American Psychiatric Association. 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM V)*. Arlington: American Psychiatric Association.

³¹ J. Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*. p. 159. italics in original.

³² Ibidem, p. 9.

- Ekman, Paul. 2003. *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life*. New York: Holt Paperbacks.
- Freeman, Mark. 2010. "Telling Stories: Memory and Narrative." *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. Ed. Susannah Radstone, Bill Schwarz. New York: Fordham University Press. 263–277.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1917. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Complete Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 14. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. 1957 Rpt. in *On Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia"*. 2009, 19–34.
- Hall, Christopher. 2011. "Beyond Kübler-Ross: Recent developments in our understanding of grief and bereavement." *InPsych* 33.6. www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/2011/december/hall/.
- Impert, Laura and Rubin, Margaret. 2011. "The Mother at the Glen: The Relationship Between Mourning and Nostalgia". *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The international Journal of Relational Perspectives*. 21: 6. 691–706.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. 2009. *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and their own Families*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Richter, Gerhard. 2010. "Acts of Memory and Mourning: Derrida and the Fictions of Anteriority". *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. Ed. Susannah Radstone, Bill Schwarz. New York: Fordham University Press. 150–160.
- Shields, David. 2009. "Memory". *A Journal of Literature and Art*. No. 46. 32–36.
- Woodson, Jacqueline. 2017. *Another Brooklyn*. London: Oneworld Publications.

Magdalena Łapińska, MA – Phd student at Faculty of Philology, University of Białystok