# MOTHERLESS CHARACTERS IN FROZEN PANES OF EMBODIED COGNITION: LISA KLEIN'S *OPHELIA*

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**Abstract:** *Troubled images of motherhood, the absent "presence" of mothers, dysfunctionalities in households hover over the deconstructed relationships in contemporary literature. The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate how* motherlessness *leaves space for personhood, for a development of identity in young-adult literature. Further on, I aim at exploring how timelessness and spatiality foster multiple displays of abandonment glued onto Ophelia from Shakespeare's* Hamlet*, and question whether Lisa Klein's representation of Ophelia fails to mirror the Shakespearean one. I am searching for instances where the emptiness of a space left behind by the absence of a mother is used in today's cultural identities (in such a novel as* Ophelia*) and can be retold, in a swift stride of modernity, from her own perspective. I used the phrase "frozen panes" — as in editing documents — since I considered that some diegetic spaces in the novel act as immoveable arrears from the past. My contribution refers to the concept of a* (m)other space *imagined in the never-lived, conceived and unperceived, that remains frozen in time. Down below the frozen panes, there is an embodied space, in a fractal-like representation of life's cyclicity: a newborn, Ophelia's child with Hamlet, the heir, the extension of time in a continual space.*

**Keywords**: *motherlessness; embodied space; timelessness; spatiality; young adult literature*

Little did the French girl and German man who posed for Robert Capa know that they were going to be considered part of Generation X, the title the photographer gave to that work, in which he wanted to capture what life was like for the young people who grew up after the Second World War. Generation X includes those born during the reconstruction of Europe, with individualism, ambition and an addiction to work — or being a workaholic — as the key values with which they grew up. They went through the entire period of technological evolution and the rise and development of the media, as well as enjoying stability in terms of both work and family and being active both physically and mentally. In spite of having adapted to a world ver. 4.0, they are less dependent on smartphones than the next generations.



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*Photograph by Robert Capa, 1944. Used with the permission of Magnum Photos, Inc.* Moore, Alison. “History, Memory and Trauma in Photography of the Tondues: Visuality of the Vichy Past through the Silent Image of Women.” *Gender & History.*

Generation Y, also known as digital natives or millennials, are those born between 1982 and 1994 and technology is part of their everyday lives: all their activities are mediated by a screen. The concept of on and off is completely integrated into their lives. However, they were not born into it; they migrated to the digital world from the analogue one in which they were living. Unlike previous generations, the world requires them to be better trained to get a job, as competition is increasing because of the economic crisis. Unlike their parents, Generation X, digital natives are not satisfied with the world around them and are ambitious and want to achieve their goals. However, the millennial generation is labelled as being lazy, narcissistic and spoilt. In fact, in 2014, *Time* magazine labelled them as the *me-me-me* generation.

Aged between ten and twenty-five years old, generation Z or the post-millennial generation will take the lead in a few decades. Also labelled as centennials, for having been born into the world at the turn of the century — the oldest were born in 1995 and the youngest in 2010 — they arrived with a tablet and a smartphone under their arm. But what is Generation Z? It is a group of people that is marked by the Internet. It is part of their DNA: it storms into their homes, their education and their way of socializing. Their mastery of technologies may make them neglect their interpersonal relationships to a greater extent, but they are the ones who give more of a voice to social causes on the Internet. They like to get everything they want immediately, a fact fostered by the digital world in which they are immersed, and their lifestyle is also influenced by YouTubers. They multi-task, but their attention span is limited. They are independent and demanding consumers and will have jobs that do not exist in today's world. Despite today's social diversity, generations Y and Z predominate. According to the study *New Kids On The Block*.



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*Millennials & Centennials Primer* by Bank of America Merrill Lynch, today there are 2 billion millennials and 2.4 billion centennials, representing 27% and 32% of the world population respectively. As for the current generation, those born after 2010, they have been termed the Alpha generation. In the context of young adult literature, this is the target audience writers try to mould to in order to capture a readership that is focused on the visual, the now and the practicalities of everyday life. So, in my opinion, the rewriting of any kind of literature is welcome provided it resonates with young adults who read online, compete in internet games and, finally, want to see heroes and heroines who are alike to their profiles. I will argue here in favour of an Ophelia recreated and re-mastered with flaws and fallacies of a contemporary kind, who mirrors today's young adult world. It is the characters who are bold, brazen and who are ready to take the world in their hands to change it that succeed and are "followed" by our teenagers. Therefore, my paper shall unfold three aspects of Lisa Klein's novel *Ophelia,* in the light of our world of young readers.

Three interconnected points, congruent in spatiality and a geodynamics of time, define my research: firstly, there is the abandonment that results in an entirely emotional life, stemming from a physical experience, such as the new, western typology where the abandoned – be it motherless, or orphaned following the death of the mother – pursues and succeeds, heart on a sleeve. Cut off from the umbilical cord, the primordial experience of abandonment begins. Action begins as liberation from the mother's protection and autonomous living prevails. These are the pillars upon which our young generation of readers, the centennials, support themselves, as a quest of their own, as a regrouping of energies, where they are the navel and upheaval, the hammer and the anvil, the central figure of an "I" which dominates *Ophelia*. Given the first-person narration, the whole diegetic space may suffer due to the subjectivity of the approach, throwing the whole presentation of the main character into a sea of doubt. On the other hand, there is the issue of abandonment – the void space – as a space for recreation and involvement, a space filled with the immoveable arrears form the past, and most importantly, with one's perspective, which is enough to wrap up facts and continue on another line, that of extended time in a continual space. This embodied cognition in *Ophelia* can be regarded as three-fold: it may first of all stem from the narrative of a Shakespearean *locus* – the fictional castle in Elsinore, although the action is not confined to a castle or its surroundings but extends outside, in nature. Ophelia is somehow thrown outside so as to recreate herself in the young adult novel; acting in a Renaissance milieu, the main character is construed as a modern, almost contemporary heroine. So, the way in which space creates personhood and the embodied cognition adds to the creation of a re-written Ophelia is achieved mostly by overlapping the Shakespearean character with a more modern one – a reconstruction which stems from the contemporary thirst for versatility, resourcefulness and without a doubt, independence. Lisa Klein offers a character with vision, without being educated, a character that allows herself to be saved from drowning for example, by Hamlet, in order to continue. It is this continuity that invites readers to be intrigued, drawn to a setting that is different, a plot line that is easy to relate to. Ophelia may also be



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regarded as a character to be looked up to since she develops and learns, she becomes a mother, loves and loses, takes charge and shows growth. In a diegetic space where the first-person narrative leaves no room for any other vision or point of view, the lack of multiple layers of the narrative does not however stand in the way of the reconstruction of a cultural identity. I plead in favour of the idea that abandonment in young adult literature is a space of recreation, therefore a space in itself where characters such as Ophelia in Lisa Klein's novel manage to occupy a place that lingers in young readers' minds, a space filled with narrative, personhood and continuity. In this view it is notable to mention how the Ophelia in Klein's novel reacts to her own feelings and physical pangs that would foreshadow her being a character of strength:

> My steps were slow, my way meandering. I noticed that Elnora looked pained and leaned heavily on Cristiana, who pleaded with her to return to the castle. I had not rubbed liniment into her joints for many days, and I felt a pang of guilt. Remembering Cristiana's honor at my appearance, I thought that the guise of madness might serve me well. So I danced a few steps, conversed with myself, and laughed at nothing. I pretended not to see them watching me. I hoped they would think that I had lost my wits through grief.
> After a time, I noticed they no longer followed me. Pricked by a sudden fear in finding myself alone, I hastily returned to the castle by the main road where many people traveled. The late afternoon sun beat upon me. I thirsted, like the wilted flowers in my basket. My feet were bruised and bled from many small cuts. The dry grass of the fields had scratched my legs. I felt a perverse pleasure in these pains, for they distracted me from my misery. (78)

The remarkable vacillation between strong and frail Ophelias on the stage, virginal and seductive Ophelias in art, inadequate or oppressed Ophelias in criticism, may reflect the ideological evolution over time, as a debate between patriarchal and feminist views in different periods of gender crisis and redefinition. The representation of Ophelia changes, independently of theories, views on the meaning of the play or the character of the Prince, for it depends on attitudes towards women and agency. Klein renders female characters endowed with power. Their individual powers – in terms of position, knowledge, cunningness or cleverness, perseverance – articulate female empowerment throughout the novel. Klein's Ophelia is proactive and takes it upon herself to change the course of history and her own fate. Such young adult representations of female powerfulness are more than even a tool able to help the young generation recognise and even magnify the interior representation of the self, somehow recreated from the ashes, a phoenix reborn – this is what the young generation wants to see and identify with. Personal quests are entered without the protagonists being driven by parents, by means of self-discovery and self-taught methods of survival, with some support from (m)others in their endeavours, albeit the resemblance with the epic rags-to-riches typology seems almost to be lurking behind.



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Secrecy, manipulation, wit, life choices, female solidarity are tools that are bestowed upon female characters in Klein's novel to point out the underrated versions of female heroines in past texts. I daresay Ophelia is not to be envisioned as a mere extension of Shakespeare's character in the play, insofar as Klein leaves space to her heroine and encircles Ophelia with multiple displays of female protection, willingness to sacrifice for her friends and the Queen, where women do not compete against each other but instead win favours from other women. The ultimate secret is the baby that Ophelia gives birth to, and in this way she explicitly chooses to be strong-willed. Having gained power over the throne to control and rule the world with her young heir, she once again chooses happiness and withdraws from the political world of privileged circumstances with dignity, thus pleading for personal development over status and affluence.

Secondly, such embodiments of cognitive experiences that the main character uses as props to change seem to leave traces; change is, according to McTaggart, "A universe in which nothing whatever changed (including the thoughts of the conscious beings in it) would be a timeless universe" (459). Perhaps it is the mother figure that lingers and encourages Ophelia to look for instances of motherhood in other female characters and not only, notwithstanding her boisterous displays of affection. Relationships with the other characters in the play are kept the same in the novel, the only exception being her relationship with Hamlet, where the whole scenario leaves space for the young generation to build upon the idea of an what-if, the incentive of imagined worlds in which they prevail. The new Ophelia re-creates life and offers, from a different posture than the Shakespearean one, a capsized, fascinating character. The space of the nunnery, where Ophelia spends most of the chapters, reconfigures the whole cycle of events in terms of isolation, of shelter mainly sought by females:

> I have no husband, mother, brother, or father in the world. I have no home, for I am cut off from Denmark forever. I am like a severed branch flung by a storm from the trunk of a great, dying tree. That Claudius is also dead gives me little comfort now. (Klein 30)

The frozen pains of the past, - not to be confused with the panes where I detect some elements of uniqueness - her insecurities that dim with ageing, let Ophelia move freely in her environment, a space that she creates for herself. Even if in the last chapters she ends up living in a nunnery and giving birth to a boy named Hamlet, it is her own agency, free will and consciousness that leads her there. She makes good use of the 'witchery" she as accused of, once she feigns her death to escape Elsinore. And she does have fears but she overcomes them to become the heroine of her offspring's story: "What if I did not love the child who would remind me of my greatest grief, the loss of its father's love" (Klein 30). This is not a character with a usable past but a female whose voice is vivid and who may live in an infinite future.

In life, most people are subjected to abandonment at some point, and connecting lives with another person who lives in a world of abandonment might



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give hope. Young readers want to become the heroes/heroines of their own lives, and reading about lonely people who survived and prospective heroes/heroines might help them on the way to becoming the person they want to become. It is obvious that orphan narratives have such a major impact on the literary world because of the fact that inside the unconscious lies a connection with the feeling of being abandoned. It can be argued that orphans are embodiments of loneliness and exclusion who are able to rise from the pain and achieve greatness in the end. Orphans offer an "everything is possible" feeling which gives hope to people. I argue that this space of loneliness, the void, is by no means filled with cognition, as the people that give comfort and soothe are sometimes there to act as loose ends and reminders of a subdued past. Cognitive activity takes place in the context of a real-world environment, and it inherently involves perception and action.

Thirdly, my instances of frozen panes in merged realities reveal a newly-emerged female character in a modern retelling, who becomes a "written mother", easily comparable to a space created and her agency, which is permanently construed as a work-in-progress, the modern trope of recreation and revival so common in young adult literature. She stands out an orphan throughout the novel, being raised motherless as she states in the opening lines:

> I have always been a motherless girl. The lady Frowendel died giving birth to me, depriving also my brother, Laertes, and my father, Polonius, of her care. I had not so much as a scrap of lace or a remembered scent of her. Nothing. Yet by the miniature framed portrait my father carried, I saw that I was the living image of my mother. (Klein 11)

This orphan status makes her neither tolerant nor accepting; on the contrary, her environment changes towards the betterment of the initial situation. Her boisterous nature—she fights her brother and Hamlet in order to prove her supremacy—hints at a woman of discontent, a character that capitalises on each and every experience to make herself heroic. She is a character of will that discards almost all religious canons, Humean or not, in a feat of personal valour. I find that David Hume's allegation sums up my idea of agency related to power exerted in order to produce a change:

> This event produces another, equally unknown: Till at last, through a long succession, the desired event is produced. But if the original power were felt, it must be known: Were it known, its effect also must be known; since all power is relative to its effect. And vice versa, if the effect be not known, the power cannot be known nor felt. (47)

Unlike the Shakespearean Ophelia, who she continually responds to commands which imply distrust and compel obedience, she is a play within a play, or an agent trying to respond to various imperious directors at once. Everyone uses her: Polonius, to gain favour; Laertes, to belittle Hamlet; Claudius, to spy on Hamlet;



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Hamlet to express rage at Gertrude; and Hamlet again, to express his feigned madness with her as a decoy. She is valued only for the roles that further other people's plots. Lisa Klein's *Ophelia* changes continuously throughout the novel, and the mere fact that in the end she gives free rein to her passion for medicinal treatments, which will, eventually, become her calling, proves her empirical way of dealing with her surroundings. Ophelia's doubts about everything, her empiricist approach, and her persistence in finding "a cause in Nature" are imbued with the eighteenth-century sceptic philosopher David Hume's refutation of all miracles and his argument "that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion" (137). This Humean sceptical outlook in Ophelia, in certain instances, turns her into a natural scientist when she ponders on the use of herbs to fake her death or even to cure the sisters from the nunnery.

*Frozen panes* is a term I borrowed from editing in Microsoft Excel to illustrate how a row or a column 'freezes', in the same way in which the embodied realities of characters in Lisa Klein's *Ophelia* freeze and unfreeze to let go of the space created underneath them, which freely unfolds. This row or column that 'freezes' is always visible, regardless of what part of the spreadsheet is being displayed. Freezing panes is especially useful if we want to pin a header that we want to always be visible. What may be regarded as 'frozen' is the fact that Ophelia can be considered to be a means to an embodiment of a transition from abandoned to motherhood, from motherless to a physical substance glorified for her being rather than for her intellect. From *femme fragile* to the cultural stance of women in today's world, *Ophelia* cannot be held as a mere response to Shakespeare's play but, in her nonconformity, the protagonist vicariously transgresses the features of a dystopian presence, which ascertains the main character's transformation.

Separation, the beginning of a pursuit as I may call it with regard to the female character in *Ophelia*, and what characterizes separation, is the perceptual absence of the object which confronts the subject about an internal representation of the invested object without associated external perception:

> I have always been a motherless girl. The lady Frowendel died giving birth to me, depriving also my brother, Laertes, and my father, Polonius, of her care. I had not so much as a scrap of lace or a remembered scent of her. Nothing. Yet by the miniature framed portrait my father carried, I saw that I was the living image of my mother. (Klein 10)

Freud considers, notwithstanding what he put forward in the first part of his works, that perception and hallucination are not mutually exclusive and can even completely coincide, mingle with each other. This is what the whole clinical description of psychosis highlights in a decisive manner, but it is also what is found in less manifested forms in a whole series of psychic functions. In this way, I can say that Ophelia, who feigns her death and also her madness in Lisa Klein's book, creates a character of will. Younger generations, the alpha generation mostly, disregard



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fallacies and come to terms easily with the specificities of each part task. There is therefore an approach in the literary world that pleads for profiles that have continuity in their movements, as if you swiped left to visualise the next chapter in a book. Klein's novel is underrated from this point of view, it revolves around an "I" that dominates the whole space, without belittling Hamlet's assertiveness, since it eventually demonstrates that in a world full of Ophelia there cannot be a world without a Hamlet. This first-person narrative leads to a performing autonomy, an extended time, a universe where the space written by a mother can be a space lived for a father as well. The use of herbs and poison in the novel may simply point to an addiction – the younger generation would completely understand this – joining the two. When Ophelia enters a secret relationship with Hamlet, he states that "this lady's mind is a fair match for [his], and her beauty grows with wisdom she speaks" (Klein 55).

A simplistic approach would divide the whole range of spatial structures between two well-known categories: that of private and that of public spaces. The first would be confined to the closed universes of housing and the house, those of the private spaces – the garden or the courtyard, so frequently mentioned in *Ophelia*. In these spaces, a good part of the domestic work is carried out, especially by females. Younger generations know that the unpaid tasks that are performed entail, for women, the gift of their time, their work, in short, the gift of oneself, this "archaic form of exchange" once theorized by Marcel Mauss (59). Ophelia, I think, has in mind the possibility of escaping the classic laws or the patriarchal and male order, separating herself from the other women in the novel, who have their sense of duty accomplished, in order to give herself credit and manifest herself. In my study of Klein's novel, I discovered the main character escapes the almost solitary accomplishment of these absorbing tasks until she finds herself in the position of a mother. Not only does Klein steer her heroine away from male dominance and patriarchal obedience, but she reconfigures Ophelia, endowing her with values, granting her freedom of choice – the powerful ingredients of life.

In her modern and young adult incarnation, Klein's version of an Ophelia of the twenty-first century in a Shakespearean setting may indicate her as proto-feminist. Not focusing on the body, Klein emphasises her intentions, her means to an end. My research would merely pinpoint the way the author of the novel throws a character frozen in time in instances meant to bring forth a more active Ophelia intent on her self-preservation. No longer interested in beauty as such, young readers might visualise themselves in a setting that invites time-traveling, in a space where characters act and interact with each other according to a modern sensibility with relevance to adolescent minds.

Lefebvre's statement regarding "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols" (39) suggests that such lived space remains frozen within time panes (just as we "freeze panes" in Microsoft Excel in order to have the same fixed elements that allow us to use other spaces to fill them with knowledge). Down below the frozen panes, there is the embodied space, in a fractal-like representation of life's cyclicity: a newborn, Ophelia's child with Hamlet, motherhood, desired or not. Her



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perspective on development is dimmed by embodiments of fears from the past. She escapes death from drowning, escapes death by feigning it, she escapes Elsinore castle while others regard her as dead. Finally, she "escapes" to the nunnery where she remains to raise her new-born Hamlet. Ophelia "escapes" Hamlet by fleeing but, by giving birth to a baby boy she calls by the same name as her long-lost love, she keeps parts of her history that remains frozen in a time and space that was lived. That living space continuously moves and reshapes itself in a fractal-like representation of life. What the characters keep might be the physical space where they develop, and their agency to produce changes is modified in Klein's novel. In her novel, Lisa Klein presents a main character – a female – who is neither learnt nor endowed with an education since she was deprived of being raised by Gertrude as a maid. Still, Ophelia's almost inborn Humean sceptical mind helps her choose. A mother's instincts are revealed and thus the character somehow hedonistically searches for wellbeing. By choosing to give birth, Ophelia engages in becoming the text of a new life, filled with hopes and sorrows.

She calls the nuns *sisters* and *mothers* – her space is now filled with embodiments of her motherless existence. There is no distinct indication that she suffers or that she may be alienated from the joys of being pampered as a child; yet, the natural way in which events are narrated brings forward an Ophelia constructed to mould into nowadays' craving for close-to-reality, almost palpable characters. However, steering clear from drama and tragic, almost lingering wretchedness, being torn between two worlds as Shakespeare's Ophelia is, Klein's female character is craftily reconciled with herself and proves to be living for herself, not pleasing the others. In her quest to continue to live and be who she chose to be, the new Ophelia incarnates a heroine who undies herself in order to accept challenges, to the young adult readers' liking. Through such literature, combining the complexities of young women's experiences, girls are able to educate themselves by means of stories and simultaneously develop a stronger sense of self.

All three coordinates or rather "columns" of a novel construct –separation in all forms, the cognitive experiences that shape both Ophelias and the written (m)other – pervasive human geography through her moving places and leaving "tracks" behind, can be merged and both Ophelias can be called human – leaving all gender inequities aside, in my view, both Shakespearean in their turmoil and contemporaneous as well, yet taken with a pinch of nowadays' real-life situations where women take the stand. Klein reinvents Ophelia with a past, a present, and a future — extending her story with her thoughts and feelings. While balancing the mediation between present and past, yet construing from Shakespearean characters and fictional historical background, Klein's setting invites readers to some comfortable distancing. This distanced space may be regarded as having been created intentionally as a space of reconciliation between the two worlds – the Renaissance and the modern one – preserving some of the past references with mark-ups of the current century in order to give hope rather than a sense of tragedy. The character is given the floor to speak and act, surging to the surface, as if in a new life, as if born again – where the primary yell is her thirst for autonomy.



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The pressures of everyday life, the struggles of adolescent girls who are facing anorexia, addictions of any kind, social pressures, sexism and gender issues make it difficult for them to embrace their own powerful self, their own politically or morally correct decisions and so, literature of such a kind may be a beacon withstanding today's painful circumstances, a current metaphor of helping each other understand the true meaning of actually living life as competently and as normally as possible. Ophelia can be metonymic in that she may remain frozen in time and may multiply in various personal spaces extended into nowadays' cultural identities, that invite into diegetic spaces of perception. In doing so, Klein gives her freedom of speech, to liberate her from the margins of tragic predicaments. Marginal space is whirl-pooled to the center, in a fractal representation where the border swerves, even more powerfully, to let this fade, just as submissive Ophelia, the original marginalized, becomes the voice in Klein's novel. Since "fiction has a mimetic relationship to the world" (Westphal 75), I believe it is the socio-political, cultural and anthropological context of humanity that can instil some tools in the current generations to help them innovate and balance the past, without necessarily being mimetic. Westphal speaks about a mimetic relationship that fiction has with the world in that it recreates instances of life that readers identify with, but since everything evolves, is it still mimetic? Does this still apply when we think of its derivatives, the mind that imagines it all? Ultimately, my findings rely, on the one hand, on the idea that Klein's female characters, mainly the heroine who undoes death and pursues hedonism, belong to a large extent to the societal demands of today. On the other hand, such representations of young adult role-models stem from the need to justify the gap between generations, to merge the past with the present in a light-hearted way by bringing to the surface characters who no longer subdue themselves under hurdles, who have a voice that must be heard and brazenly relinquish bonds from the past, who surge under the shape of faulty characters, who, under any circumstances, resist and lead their own life. This unprecedented prerequisite of being oneself and best managing life choices in the pursuit of a self-statement, seems to be what adolescents crave for. Addressing focal points for young girls such as teenage motherhood, lust, addictions, abandonment and lack of parental love, Klein sets forth a character of will to empower the women of today, to bridge a gap no longer unsurpassable by teen readers. Even change itself – be it in the character, be it in the way it is built or re-envisioned – is the basic condition of human development, since it lays the grounds for the prospect of advancement.

To conclude, I see the young generation a click away from almost anything, visually displayed or most often written at their own disposal. The odds are on what to do with the click. Such readers may find Klein's characters intriguing, self-construing and forever changing, just like the heroes and heroines from their favourite games, in the timeless space of an application or even in a film on the big screen. Reading is then a revenge on the arguments of real life, a refuge, an escape. And in moments of weakness or questioning, identification with the heroes plays a providential role.



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