

# Symbolism of the Image of the Mother in the Novel "Missing Mother"

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## **Abstract:**

This article devoted to the Joyce Carol Oates's novel "Missing Mum", the protagonist grapples with profound feelings of loss and longing following her mother's absence. The narrative explores themes of guilt, identity, and the struggle for emotional connection through rich symbolism, particularly the use of water as both a refuge and a source of anxiety. The protagonist's relationship with Valli Szalla complicates her emotional landscape, introducing societal judgment and familial expectations. Oates's vivid imagery and metaphorical depth invite readers to engage with the complexities of grief, isolation, and the search for self-acceptance, ultimately illuminating the universal human experience of loss.

**Keywords:** symbolism, emotional state, protagonist, self-reassurance, internal monologue.

Missing Mom, written by Joyce Carol Oates, is a social psychological novel that explores the chaos and dysfunction of family dynamics. Oates uses a variety of poetic devices, including symbolism, metaphor, and imagery, to develop the theme of alienation and the search for identity. Symbols, such as various natural elements or objects, may have been used to symbolize loss and despair, as well as to highlight the emotional state of her characters. She likely intended to evoke deep feelings of compassion and empathy in readers, as well as to allow them to see the true essence of loss and separation.

The opening chapter of the novel introduces the reader to the emotional journey that the author is about to embark on. It introduces the theme of loss and the regret associated with not being able to say goodbye to a loved one last time. The use of rhetorical questions and self-reassurance conveys the internal struggle that the protagonist is going through. Overall, the passage sets the stage for a poignant and thoughtful exploration of grief and loss: "Last time you see someone and you don't know it will be the last time". And all that you know now, if only you'd known then. But you didn't

know, and now it's too late. And you tell yourself How could I have known, I could not have known. You tell yourself”.

The protagonist of the novel, Nikki Eaton, experiences a profound sense of isolation and detachment. She feels lost, disconnected from herself, her family, and the world at large. Oates uses language to effectively convey Nikki's inner turmoil. The use of fragmented sentences, disjointed thoughts, and repetition reflect Nikki's disorientation and confusion. The language reminds the reader that she has lost the ability to be coherent, which is a common theme throughout the novel: “I began coughing. I could not stop coughing. Tears leaked from my eyes though I wasn't crying. Out of the buzzing blur someone, a man, a man whose name I had forgotten, handed me a glass of water. I was called Ms. Eaton. I was told to take my time, to speak clearly. I saw that everyone in the courtroom was observing me, listening to me”.

The use of various techniques such as internal monologue helps to highlight Nikki's emotional state. The author describes Nikki's relationship with her sister and brother-in-law, their alienation resulting from the lack of family ties. These images help to highlight the lack of connection that exists between Nikki and her family:

*“Clare. I can't. Can't—what? Can't do it. Do what? Stop shivering, you're driving me crazy. Do this. You know. I don't know! ...Mom. Well, you are. You are doing it, just like me”. “When we're married, you won't need to see us. Maybe I won't invite you and Rob to the wedding, you'll be spared the embarrassment of declining”.*

In this example, Joyce Carol Oates uses dialogue and subtext to show the complex relationships between the characters. She creates tension between them and reveals the dilemma that the characters face. Through quick, sharp lines, the author conveys feelings of helplessness and awkwardness. The character's internal monologue also allows the reader to enter into their emotional state. This creates emotional depth and complexity between the characters, making their relationships more realistic and complex.

Symbolism is also an important aspect of the novel. The motif of death is repeated throughout the novel, serving as a symbol of the loss and despair that Nikki feels. The symbolism of the missing mother further emphasizes the theme of alienation. The absence of a maternal figure serves as a metaphor for the broken relationships within the family and underlies the sense of unfulfilled longing that Nikki experiences:

*“Suddenly, I wanted to be with Mom. I wanted to run away from everyone, to be with Mom. We staggered out of the Chautauqua County Courthouse and into the startling sunshine of a day in early summer”. “...Mom? Mom? I seemed to know Mom is gone, this is my fault for leaving her even as I knew it could not be so, my mother would never leave us, of course Mom would never leave us because she loved us, because she was Mom”.*

The beginning of the section describes the character's strong desire to be with her mother, to leave everyone behind and be with her. The phrase "Suddenly, I wanted to be with Mom. I wanted to run away from everyone, to be with Mom" conveys the sudden emergence of a strong attraction to the mother, emphasizing the emotional intensity of the situation.

Then there is a transition to an internal monologue, where the hero begins to repeat the word "Mom" and realizes that his mother has left. This moment adds tension and sadness to the text, emphasizing the loss and possible feelings of guilt in the character for leaving. The repetition of the phrase *"my mother would never leave us, of course Mom would never leave us because she loved us, because she was Mom"* reinforces the desperate desire to hold on to the image of the mother, not to believe that she is gone.

In *The Missing Mother*, Oates uses symbolism to convey meaning and evoke emotion. The novel's protagonist represents more than just a physical absence; she also embodies the emotional void left

in Nikki's life. Additionally, the recurring image of Nikki's mother's hands, which feature prominently in the heroine's memories, represents both comfort and loss. *"I'd taken Mom's hand, which was small-boned, and surprisingly cool. The more I thought about taking Mom on a trip, the more excited I became"*.

Oates's creation of metaphor in "Missing Mother" gives the novel a poetic resonance. For example, the recurring motif of water that Nikki associates with her mother represents both the ebb and flow of emotions and the inexorable passage of time. Metaphorical imagery in the novel underscores the characters' emotional journeys while adding depth and nuance to the themes explored:

*"After your father passed away, you know, Gwen was at the pool every morning. She told me, 'In the water you feel so free"*.

*"...It was tempting to hide underwater in the pool. Sinking slowly to the concrete floor that felt smooth against the soles of my bare feet. Beside me, near enough to touch, was a wavy tiled wall. The water glimmered aqua and was sinuous, caressing. At a short distance were the pudgy bodies, slow-paddling legs of sister swimmers. Ten seconds. Fifteen. Stubbornly I held my breath until my brain began to feel like something that could explode. And my lungs, my throat. Twenty seconds. Twenty-five. Twenty-six, twenty-seven..."*.

In this example we see the metaphor "It was tempting to hide underwater in the pool" and the image of diving to the bottom of the pool, which symbolize the desire for detachment from the outside world, for isolation and inner immersion. The description of the water as "sinuous, caressing" and the description of the feeling of floating and holding one's breath create images that convey the intensity of the protagonist's experiences. The repetition of numbers ("Ten seconds. Fifteen...") emphasizes moments of tension and fear, evoking a feeling of agony and uncertainty.

Another plot line in the novel is Nikki's love affair with a married man, Valli Szalla, because of whom the heroine is often subjected to general hostility from both her family and other people.

*"Nikki, the man is an adulterer. A hypocrite. A manipulator. He has made my lovely sweet daughter into a—an 'other woman". I was awake all last night thinking this, and how wrong it was for you to ask me to meet him, and for me to accept. Oh, I feel just terrible! I couldn't say one honest word to either of you, I just—'made conversation.' I am so ashamed of myself"*.

The mother's emotional turmoil as she struggles with the realization that her daughter is involved with a married man. The use of negatively connoted words such as "adulterer," "hypocrite," and "manipulator" highlight the mother's disapproval and sense of betrayal towards the man. The mother's self-reproach and shame indicate her internal conflict between her loyalty to her daughter and her moral values. The mother's repetition of the phrase "I just" suggests that she is struggling to express her true feelings, perhaps out of fear of hurting her daughter or ruining their relationship. Overall, the passage conveys the complex and conflicting emotions that arise in family relationships when faced with moral dilemmas.

The author uses dialogue to create a sense of intimacy between the characters, allowing them to reveal their deepest thoughts and feelings. Conversations between Nikki and her sister, for example, give readers insight into the complexities of Nikki's psychological state, while interactions between Nikki and estranged family members expose the tensions that exist between them. By using dialogue to create these personal connections, Oates highlights the novel's themes of family ties, loss, and the search for identity: *"Nikki! That isn't your taste at all. Lavender? 'Pretty pink pastel'? You with your pierced ears and punk hair, you've got to be kidding."* Or, meanly: *"Sweetie, you can't seriously think that could ever fit you. Mom was a petite size two, practically a midget beside you. "I resented Clare's tone. Midget!"*.

The use of the words "Lavender? 'Pretty pink pastel'? You with your pierced ears and punk hair, you've got to be kidding" shows the author's obvious irony towards the situation being described,

emphasizing the differences between the characters' tastes and styles. The change in speech in the dialogue from a friendly tone to indignation and anger "Sweetie, you can't seriously think that could ever fit you. Mom was a petite size two, practically a midget beside you" displays the emotional intensity and relationships between the characters.

The title of the novel symbolizes the physical absence of Nikki's mother, but it also embodies the emotional void left in Nikki's life. Her grief and confusion over her mother's disappearance reflect the feelings of loss and abandonment that drive much of the novel's emotional resonance. Trees play an important role in the novel, with several key scenes taking place in wooded areas. The trees represent both the natural world and the cycle of life and death, as well as Nikki's own growth and self-discovery. The symbolism evokes a sense of both beauty and danger, heightening the novel's emotional resonance: *"In the lobby there were palm fronds and enormous seashell decorations, potted orange trees with dust-laden leaves, a pungent odor of gardenia air freshener and insecticide beneath"*.

Birds appear throughout the novel, both literally and figuratively. Nikki is fascinated by a pair of bluebirds on her family's property, and she often imagines herself soaring in the distance like a bird. The imagery of birds represents freedom, escape, and transcendence, as Nikki struggles to overcome the emotional burden of her past. The use of this symbol gives the novel a poetic resonance, heightening its emotional impact: *"The ceremony ended with several elderly women trying to coax three doves out of a wire cage, which took some time. Finally, two emerged from the cage flapping their wings agitatedly into the foliage overhead; the third held back, wary and confused, until at last I lost patience, grabbed the cage and tilted it sharply so the dove had no choice but to tumble out onto the ground, and flap its wings in a panic to escape. "Go! Fly! Get as far away as you can!"*.

Overall, despite some mixed reviews from critics, *Missing Mother* remains a poignant exploration of loss and family relationships.

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