

Repressed Grief in The Babadook and The Icarus Girl

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David Corish

The Babadook centres around the character of Amelia, her struggles with grief and her abnormally difficult child, Samuel. The Babadook itself is the shadow archetype of her personality; a part of herself that she has refused to confront out of disgust. She represses feelings of hate towards Samuel, allowing that part of her mind to grow unchecked. Her endless patience soon gives way to fits of anger and psychosis, worsening throughout the film. She begins to lash out and screams at Samuel, “Why can’t you just be normal?” (*The Babadook*, 00:032:09-00:32:11) Through her unhealthy repression and ignorance of darker feelings, she has given the sick part of her mind power. In Risker’s interview with Kent, she says “I wanted an audience to feel like they had a pair of hands around their neck from the beginning, and these hands were getting tighter and tighter until the feeling of claustrophobia was almost unbearable. Then it explodes.” (15) This feeling that Kent wanted the audience to experience is analogous to Amelia’s; her shadow’s grip tightening over her before becoming unbearable and exploding.

The Icarus Girl also sees the return of the repressed. This time, in the form of TillyTilly; a result of Jessamy’s parents repressing Yoruba mythology and the memory of Jess’s twin, Fern. Ouma points out that “The death of her twin sister at birth is problematized by the apparently unfinished rituals that her mother should have performed at that time.” (197) It is the repression of these traditions that lead to the manifestation of TillyTilly. Jess’s parents chose to forget that Fern existed and instead of treating her with respect, they do not even acknowledge her by name, referring to her only as “it”. “‘She knows about it,’ she said, through the door. ‘I don’t get this. I’m an idiot. Talk me through this—what’s happened? Something’s reminded you of . . . it?’ A brief pause, then: ‘I didn’t know I was allowed to remember.’” (*Oyeyemi*, 156 – 156) As a result of Jess’s parents’ actions, the repressed Fern has now returned, manifesting in the form of TillyTilly.

The Babadook uses several metaphors to convey Amelia's repression of grief. The basement represents her husband and is where she has relegated all of his belongings to. Amelia has locked any memory of him away; refusing to accept his death. Buerger proposes that "The basement is positioned as both a repository of pain and a 'vortex of summons and repulsion' for Amelia" (41) The film's titular monster and its storybook are also both metaphors for Amelia's sorrow and heartache. It is even possible that Amelia herself may be the writer of the storybook. When asked by her sister's friend, she mentions she used to write "kids' stuff" (*The Babadook*, 00:29:22 – 00:29:25) The book, in spite of Amelia's attempts to repress and destroy it, always returns. When confronting the Babadook, Amelia yells "This is my house! You're trespassing in my house!" (*The Babadook*, 01:21:57 – 01:22:09) The Babadook now retreats, subdued, to the basement and Amelia begins to feed it daily. This is a symbol for her process of mourning. Amelia now allows herself to feel sorrow and realises that grief has a place. Quigley argues that "Amelia's acknowledgement and acceptance of the Babadook (that is, as the 'monstrous' manifestation of her inadmissible feelings about motherhood as a result of their repression ...) is integral to her revised relationship not only to her son, but also to herself as a mother." (74)

In *The Icarus Girl*, the character of TillyTilly is not only a metaphor for the repression of Jess's twin but is also representative of Jess's incomplete self. Jess is an odd child; isolated and prone to fits. She even needs to say her name out loud to prove to herself that she is real. "My name is Jessamy. I am eight years old" (Oyeyemi, 14) This is due, in part, to her struggles with self-identity and the repression of her heritage. She is caught between two identities, British and Nigerian, not wanting to identify as the "half-and-half child" (Oyeyemi, 14) Mafe points out that "In her efforts to articulate a cultural identity between identities, Jess literally creates a new self in the form of a doppelganger. Titola" (24) This incompleteness is not limited solely to her heritage. It is also a result of the repression of her twin. TillyTilly, as her second half, soon becomes fast friends with Jess. She has a "place as the most interesting girl Jess knew." (Oyeyemi, 62) After TillyTilly reveals that Jess once had a twin, Jess begins to gain a clearer understanding of her place in the world. Ouma acknowledges this effect on Jess,

saying “Fern seems to be the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle that is Jess’s life; her missing twin explains her incomplete sense of self and the lack of a matching double.” (197)

Kent and Oyeyemi skilfully demonstrate how the ignorance and repression of problems always cause them to reappear. In these texts, the repressed take the form of ghosts, shadows and texts; each of which is a metaphor for neglect on the protagonist’s behalf. It is clear that the repression of emotion is a corrupting influence and a plague on mental health. As Baxter says, “Your skin folds and your back bends from the weight of everything you said ‘No’ to. Here it is, again and again.” (93)

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David Corish · david@corish.dev

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