

Narcissism and Object Relations Theory in B. S. Johnson's *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*

by Deborah Quick

The 1960's is a period of rebellion worldwide. With the rise of capitalism, the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, and postmodernism, metafictional writers expressed their rebellion and discontent with society through their writing. British writer B. S. Johnson is one of those prolific writers. Johnson's fiction, like most postwar authors, is self-reflexive to a certain degree; however, "“metafiction remains [the] useful term for designating those works that emerged in the 1960's that make their own fictionality a central issue”" (Grausam 514). His novel *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* conveys themes of loneliness and isolation as well as themes consistent with Marxist theories and the impact of capitalism in a changing world. In the 1960's, while US troops were dying in Vietnam, innocent lives were lost daily in England and Ireland as the IRA terrorized England to prevent Ireland from becoming part of Great Britain. Writers did their part to voice their opinions on the cultural and political situations of the 1960's through metafiction. As a response to modernism, postmodernism metafictional texts explore realism and narrative structure through avant-garde styles of writing. Metafictional writing often appears more as simulations and games in a literary world of realism and structure, "“evidence for what Christopher Lasch has called the culture of narcissism”" (Grausam 33).

B. S. Johnson is not immune from the chaos and uncertainty of his generation. He found solace in writing and hoped for a commercially and financially successful career as a writer, aspiring to the same authorial status that James Joyce and Samuel Beckett received. Johnson remarks that he writes "“to exorcise, to remove from myself, from my mind, the burden [of]

having to bear some pain, the hurt of some experience: in order that it may be over there, in a book, and not in here in my mind” (Levitt 586). As much as Johnson desires major authorial status, he is relegated to minor author status among many critics. This may be in part to his attitude and personality traits. Johnson is regarded by some critics as an author with ““considerable talents [who] seem[s] to me unnecessarily limited by his doctrinaire attitudes. For an English writer Johnson is remarkably conscious and theoretical in his ideas about what he wants to do” (Tew 43-44). Johnson finds his truth in writing about everyday life. He rejects the traditional realism found in many British novels and opts instead to depict everyday life as he sees it, as chaotic and unpredictable. Johnson considers himself a writer of truth and not fiction, and perhaps his formative years impacted his view of everyday life as chaotic. Unlike Joyce and Beckett, Johnson faced a difficult childhood influenced ““by formative experiences as an evacuee and a ‘young man during the youth culture in the 1950s”” (Dawson 215). Johnson’s personal experiences shape most of his texts including the loss of his best friend and the loss of his mother.

His own persona and his characters are inextricably linked. An acquaintance and colleague, Giles Gordon, states:

Bryan Johnson was a working-class lad who had the singular fortune to marry a beautiful middle-class girl, Virginia Kimpton... He was extremely aggressive, and quarrelled readily, unnecessarily with those who wished him well as much as with those who couldn't have given a hoot. His working-class chip could hardly have been more blatant'. Johnson is mediated by marriage and condemned for his social awareness and positioning. A better if unwilling paradigm for underlying class tensions would be hard to imagine; the contrast of voice with Johnson's conveys much. (Tew 44)

Johnson's aggressive and quarrelsome personality combined with his grandiose and extremely defined and rigid ideology concerning literature is representative of a man with narcissistic tendencies. Examining B. S. Johnson's metafictional narrative *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* through a psychoanalytic lens applying object relations theory, reveals a narcissistic protagonist and author.

In *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, Johnson creates a protagonist whose personality provides a canvas for psychoanalytic theory, particularly object relations theory. This theory examines the "dynamic relationship between a subject and the subject's significant objects, where an object is anything or anyone - either real or in fantasy - that is libidinally cathected by the subject" (Stirling 82). Libidinal is derived from libido which is Sigmund Freud's term for sexual urges; however, this term may also be attached to other urges or drives. Cathexis is a term used to express the action of libidinal energy being expended on a specific object or idea. In Malry's case, this would mean the investment of energy he spends on sabotaging entities whom he believes have transgressed him.

Sigmund Freud's object relations theory has been interpreted by a number of psychologists with varying ideas of its impact on the infant and its manifestation as the infant matures and enters into adulthood. However, Melanie Klein's 1921 interpretation of object-relations theory moved the infant's object from the father to the mother. It is Klein's interpretation that is most relevant to B. S. Johnson and *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*. Johnson's mother is a pervading influence in his life, and in this novel, Johnson devotes an entire chapter to Malry's mother. In Klein's theory, the infant focuses on the breast of the mother in two ways. The infant loves the breast because it provides sustenance and comfort; however, the infant also hates the breast when it is withdrawn. Therefore, the infant divides the object, the

breast, into two parts; the wholly loved breast and the wholly hated breast (Stirling 83). The conflicting feelings for the same object lead the infant to view the mother's breast in a defensive manner. Klein termed this splitting. (Stirling 83)

Malry displays the idea of splitting when it comes to money. He loves money and wants to obtain money, a great deal of money; he even goes so far as to become a bank employee to work closely with money. However, he also detests others who have money and feels they wrong him in many ways on a regular basis. This is where Klein's idea of splitting applies to Malry. Splitting as a defensive tactic "protects the infant from the anxiety that results from having to divert aggressive and destructive impulses toward an object that it simultaneously love[s] and cherishes[s]. The fundamental ambivalence of Kleinian object-relations captures the two poles of aggression and idealization that inform subsequent theories of narcissism" (Stirling 83). When Malry learns about double entry in accounting, the concept of splitting comes to fruition with the debiting of all those who he feels trespass against him, and his personal credits increase by way of sabotage to collect the debt he feels is owed to him. Johnson provides visual representations of Malry's double entry system of bookkeeping with his arbitrary entries and random amounts of money owed to him, and the transgression he takes to correct these perceived injuries to him and the monetary value Malry feels they are worth.

The relevance of "object-relations theories of narcissism for metafiction can be seen primarily when the phenomenon of splitting is invoked through paradigms of idealization and aggression" (Stirling 100). Utilizing object relations theory to understand and analyze metafictional texts allows for a broader scope of examination rather than the typical analysis of invoking defamiliarization which is limiting in its scope. Metafictional texts offer more than a unique analysis of language and semiotics, they also encompass "issues and implications for how

the narrative strategies of metafiction texts can embody cultural values” (Stirling 100). Johnson’s own liberal political views resonate with Malry and both Johnson and Malry embrace Marxist views concerning the proletariat and bourgeoisie and the problematic and oppressive ideology behind capitalism. According to Fredric Jameson, the typical Formalist approach to analyzing metafiction tends to marginalize "the political" dimension of metafictional novels (Stirling 81). Political, religious, and cultural concerns often drive the narrative in metafiction with the defamiliarization constituting a secondary narrative.

The object relations theory may be applied to the metafictional narrative, characters in the novel, or the author. When applied to Johnson himself and the character of Christie Malry, what emerges is an underlying impetus for the narcissistic actions of the author inserting himself into the novel and an impetus for the deadly actions of the protagonist. Otto Kernberg, “the foremost commentator on the issue of narcissism in contemporary object-relations theory” (Stirling 84-85) proposes a model of transference in the object-relations theory amounting to an internalized dialogue of “‘You are nothing; I am great’ transference,” (Stirling 84-85) wherein these “transferential relationships are characterized by the Kleinian phenomenon of splitting” (Stirling 84-85). When applying this characteristic of narcissistic pathology to metafictional works, transferential models may inform how “metafictional texts thematize the activity of reading whereas the process of splitting addresses the fragmentation of plot so commonly found in metafictional texts” (Stirling 85).

Christie Malry is representative of this transference model. Malry exhibits splitting with his coveted object, money, and through his idealization and aggression transference creates his own “you are nothing; I am great” scenario through his double entry accounting system. Malry views himself as one owed for the perceived injustices he has sustained from

society. Believing he is more intelligent than other people, Malry uses the people around him to further his personal cause of getting even with all those in a position of money and power, individuals and institutions. This fills Malry with a sense of superiority and power. He displays no concern for others, even those closest to him; he lacks empathy. Malry isolates himself and trusts no one, exhibiting a lack of intimacy with any other human beings, and his sole purpose is revenge. Malry's "issues of aggression and idealization that partly define narcissism are also at play," (Stirling 99) within the text and lead Johnson to kill his protagonist as his own narcissistic traits emerge. This is a "defining quality of narcissism," whether found in the characters, the narrative, or the author and "clearly resonates with the self-reflexive turn of metafictional literature [paving] the way for a rather loose and often pejorative invocation of the term 'narcissistic' to characterize metafiction as a genre" (Stirling 80).

Johnson shares some of these same narcissistic traits with his protagonist. Like Malry, Johnson feels the literary world owes him a greater status. Often relegated to minor novelist status, Johnson believes his metafictional works, poetry, and scripts are worthy of more acknowledgement and monetary reward than he is given. "The assertion that the libidinal economies of narcissistic personalities provide models for the consideration of metafictional texts" (Stirling 81) seems a relevant contention for Johnson.

When applying object relations theory and narcissism to B. S. Johnson's *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, splitting appears structurally and textually, and the "potential to glimpse a wider interpretive vista beyond the limit of defamiliarization is opened up when metafiction is placed in conjunction with models of narcissism" (Stirling 82). Examining the structural splitting reveals two narratives. The plot which contains Christie Malry's journey

and the subplot which involves Johnson and the reader. One narrative is the good object, and one narrative is the bad object, and the two parts create the whole novel. The first narrative, Malry's story, is attacked by the second narrative, the intrusion of the author, who degrades and controls the first narrative. The "subversions of the first narrative are related, in large part, to the epistemological difficulties that arise when attempting to figure loss and absence for representation," (Stirling 91) which occurs throughout Johnson's novel. Johnson, rather than describing Malry, transfers the job to the reader thereby justifying the absence of Malry's description. He does this on a number of occasions implying the reader should use his/her imagination. As the narrative progresses, Malry turns more violent, and Johnson quickly kills him with cancer, ridding Johnson and the reader of the protagonist but leaving a loss within the structure of the novel and ending the novel without a climax nor denouement. As in the narcissistic psyche, splitting serves to "mediate the ambivalent relationship of the first narrative to the problems it poses in its own diegetic process: problems that are split off into the second narrative" (Stirling 94).

The splitting of the textuality of the novel into two parts creates a semi-fluid narrative interrupted by chaotic text such as the double entry pages, the preface to each chapter, the script format in Chapter V, the list in Chapter XV, and Malry's codified manifesto in Chapter X, among others characteristic of metafictional novels. However, splitting does not necessarily lessen the unity of the novel. The splitting of the metafictional narrative "can serve to embody the common thematic level-epistemological issues of loss and absence-that traverse these works" (Stirling 94). The splitting of the textuality provides the chaotic elements in life Johnson often alludes to when interviewed.

In terms of thematic construction, Johnson's novel embodies the components of aggression and idealization that determine narcissism in object relations theory. This is not an affront to Johnson. On the contrary, these narrative impulses of the metafictional text may convey the theme the author intended. This narrative strategy of metafiction "become[s] [a] potent vehicle for the assertion of dissident cultural values which also embody profound epistemological insights into the adequacy of narrative as a representational medium" (Stirling 82). This is evident with Malry's war against a rising capitalist economy which, in Malry's view, the "every man" is reduced to nothing, easily replaceable, and unappreciated. Johnson's own liberal ideology on politics is mirrored through Malry's character and his double entry system. However, Johnson is not a violent liberal. Malry is created to be the character to which Johnson can transfer his liberal political aggression without fear of reprisal. According to Morton Levitt, "The living of the life and the writing are virtually interchangeable in Johnson, influencing, reinforcing, even, in a way, creating each other" (Johnson 574). Therefore, Malry may be considered an extension of Johnson or perhaps Johnson himself.

Malry is allowed to commit mischievous, and later, horrible crimes. The idea of Malry as the bad part and Johnson as the good part of a whole entity refers back to the splitting in object relations theory. Christie Malry is able to take action against an unfair society that Johnson, himself, could not. As a young man, Johnson works in accounting and also in a bakery, which bears a striking resemblance to Malry's character. Johnson states, "the novel is a form[...] within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write the truth in the form of a novel" (Levitt 575). If *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* conveys Johnson's idea of truth, then the character of Christie Malry embodies that truth in some way. In idealization and aggression, characteristic of narcissism, Johnson projects idealization onto the reader by presenting the

reader with a protagonist who is a “simple man” who aspires to make money. Most readers will be able to identify with such a character and Malry, at first, displays characteristics typical of most protagonists. However, slowly Malry begins to unravel, and his aggression becomes more pronounced over time showing the true narcissistic nature of his character. If Malry is an extension of Johnson, then Johnson, himself, contains these characteristics. The “[theme] the familiar loneliness, the sense of betrayal” (Levitt 579) are constant variables in Malry’s life, just as they seem to be in Johnson’s life, and the metafictional text is a strong vehicle to convey this theme.

The attitude of metafictional text “toward itself can be modeled on the attitudes and defensive postures assumed by narcissistic personalities in the context of ... transference” (Stirling 95). In Johnson’s case, this equates to his transference to the reader. Johnson takes an authoritative role within the text, informing the reader what he/she presumes and patronizing the reader throughout. This is an aggressive posturing emphasizing the “I am great; you are nothing” attitude of the narcissistic personality. Johnson fails to realize his readers are integral to the success of his novels, and alienating readers through tone creates a conflicting dynamic rather than a homogenous one. In Chapter VI, Johnson speaks to his readers, “That is what draws them to the novel, that it stimulates their imagination! Imagining my characters, indeed!” Investing them with characteristics quite unknown to me, or even at variance with such description as I have given!” (Johnson 51); however, Johnson is mocking the reader. The three exclamation marks he uses at the end of the short emphatic sentences emphasize the loud mocking tone of Johnson toward his readers. Johnson does not “share the romantic disposition of some writers who tended to exalt the imagination, to equate it with invention, and to consider it as the distinguishing mark of genius” (Havens 243). Contrarily, Johnson believes imagination is only

the gathering of visual data from memory and not the invention of something new. Johnson believes he, like other geniuses with whom he groups himself, are inventors, and others who favor imagination are participating in regurgitation. At the end of the same paragraph, Johnson provides the ultimate insult in a mocking tone complete with an explanation point to shout his final insult by stating, “What writer can compete with the reader’s imagination!” (Johnson 51)

Johnson continues mocking the reader’s imagination in Chapter VII after a sex scene between Malry and the Shrike. Johnson intrudes to tell the reader, “Now there is something on which the reader may exercise his imagination!” Again, Johnson employs the exclamation mark, shouting at the reader and relegating him/her to an inferior position since the reader is only capable of imagination not invention. One of Johnson’s most overt displays of narcissism appears in Chapter IX. While it seems to be a loose summary of the chapter of Genesis in the Bible, it is also Johnson proliferating his position of God in this novel, in particular, but this may be generalized to his other texts as well. Johnson states, “God has been making it all up as He goes along, like certain kinds of novelist...” (Johnson 80). Conspicuous is the capitalizing of the pronoun “He” which is capitalized when referring only to God, but in this sentence also refers to Johnson. Therefore, Johnson dedicates this chapter about God to himself. In Chapter XXIII, Johnson speaks to Malry and states, “...that he could not die without me” (Johnson 180). While true, Johnson feels compelled to share this information with the reader to emphasize his dominant authority over life and death in his novel.

Often throughout the novel, Johnson speaks to the reader and tells the reader what he will not write, insinuating he is above what he considers to be a menial task of informing the reader and in essence, leaves the reader to figure out what Johnson would or might write. In Chapter XIX, as Malry and the Shrike make their way to the Shrike’s Old Mum’s house, Johnson makes

a point to convey to the reader, “And I am not going out with theodolite and mate to determine just where she lived in relation to the hundred-foot contour line, or to work out how high her flat took her above it in relation to ground level; no, not for you: nor anyone” (Johnson 155).

Johnson is unnecessarily disrespectful to his reader, and Johnson doesn't stop with his lashing on the reader, he includes all others as well. Otto Kernberg discusses the effect of the narcissistic aggression component:

In transference and argues that the inability of the narcissist to acknowledge her or his dependence upon external objects is quickly transformed into envy of any helpful object. That envy cannot be acknowledged because it would violate the self-image of a grandiose omnipotent self-held by the narcissist; envy therefore finds its expression in the aggressive devaluation of the helpful object. (Stirling 97)

With such a haughty and omnipotent attitude toward readers and other authors, Johnson alienates himself from those who could be of great benefit to his career and success. The grandiose idea of the self prohibits the narcissist from facing the true inadequacy and loneliness buried within his psyche.

This may also impact the theme of the novel as “the forces of aggression and idealization that a metafictional text can direct towards its [reader] can circumscribe the problematics of loss and absence that obscure and reveal the meaning of the text” (Stirling 99). Each of these examples highlights Johnson's narcissism and aggression toward the reader. The narcissistic traits in Johnson's personality subtly emerge at first and by Chapter VI begin to show how Johnson views those who read his texts.

Christie Malry's character embodies narcissism and the object relations theory as well. Beginning as most narcissists do, Malry appears to be a young simple man seeking his way in the

world and on a quest for success and money. This is a fairly typical scenario for most young people. He has a respectable job in a bank and seems to be a hard-working young adult observing society in order to understand its intricacies, especially business and money. The object Malry divides into two parts coinciding with object relations theory is money by way of his double entry bookkeeping system. He sets up two columns: one for debits and one for credits. His credit column consists of money and other means of payment to him. His debit column is filled with money owed to him and eventually offenses done to him. As Malry begins with small injustices he feels are directed at him, he soon turns those into grandiose injustices from all of society which he determines he, and he alone, must rectify to balance his double entry system. He begins to display no moral compass, and his justifications to himself appear delusional.

Malry has no intimate friends and no personal relationships other than the Shrike, and as much as the Shrike, over time, expresses her love for Malry, he only uses her for sex, never returning her love. The Shrike tells Malry, “I don’t know why I love you so much, “but I do mystery man. And I don’t ask any questions, just bring home the odd pound of stuffed breast of lamb...” (Johnson 137). Malry never professes his love for her, and it is obvious from the Shrike’s words, she is unsure of what Malry does on his own time; there’s no intimacy shared. He maintains the appearance of a sincere lover, as is required by narcissists in order to maintain their secrets. Malry unequivocally states he must never let the Shrike know of his plans. This is not an intimately personal relationship but one of convenience. When Malry poisons the water system, he shares no concern for the Shrike and what could possibly happen to her. In fact, he assures himself, she will drink milk in the morning and not water. At his job, it is “the complaints [that] give him the most pleasure” (Johnson 40). Rather than wanting to provide customer service and solve problems, Malry would rather listen to the misery of others. He uses

those around him, his co-workers, to uncover information that will assist him in his devious plans to punish society and enact revenge for everything he is lacking in his life.

His narcissistic traits begin to take shape when Malry is a child. He shows signs early on of detachment and a lack of empathy as his mother recalls in Chapter III, "I even allowed you to keep a pet, a cat, in order to encourage some kind of loving in you" (Johnson 28). As many narcissistic individuals are, Malry is enabled by his mother, and she reflects on Malry's opposition to authority, "Who could wonder if from that moment we dated your attitude towards authority?" (Johnson 29). Upon the death of his mother, Malry receives delight at refusing to pay the undertaker after his mother's cremation and thinks to himself how satisfied that he got away with it.

As Malry's two objects, his ledger debits and credits, come into increasingly more conflict with each other, he is unable to balance his ledger. Malry, himself, seems to become more delusional and unbalanced as well. His justifications for his horrific deeds grow as his moral depravity grows. He transfers blame for any injustice he feels he has encountered throughout his life onto all of society, not just those with power and money, but everyone. He believes, "They will blame it on the government, and not me" (Johnson 147). Malry never displays remorse at causing others misfortune and justifies to himself that killing innocent people, taking human life, is legitimized if it achieves his personal objective. Malry is detached from society, detached from meaningful intimate relationships; he is isolated and self-absorbed. His two libidinal drives include causing others harm and having sex, probably in that order.

In Klein's theory, "there is no mental process that does not involve objects, external or internal; in other words, object-relations are at the centre of emotional life" (Stirling 84).

Malry's blatant narcissism is unstoppable and can only end if Malry ends. Therefore, Johnson interrupts the narrative to stop Malry from causing any more harm to innocent people.

In *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, author B. S. Johnson and the character of Christie Malry both display narcissistic traits, and object relations theory offers insight into the mind of this author, his characters, and his metafictional texts. Johnson's novels, despite the fragmentation, "remain contextually rooted; they are materially and processually contextual, since people are embodied and everything commences at some point of specificity, however apparently arbitrary, which reflects Johnson's notion of the impossible infusion within possible knowledge of being and the world" (Tew 56).

Metafiction remains a strong dynamic element in postmodernism, and cultural trends toward metafiction continue today. Public consciousness has been impacted by commercials such as Nike to television shows such as the *Seinfeld* series. (Stirling 100) Johnson is "the one serious novelist who has been fearless of 'experiment' and of being linked with the Modernists" (Levitt 586). He believes his novels embody truth not fiction, and through his truths, Johnson illuminates the ugliness of everyday life and the impact of capitalism on society. To some degree, "the metafictional impulse has been co-opted by the rapacious forces of consumerism that define late-capitalism, this fact does not necessarily rob metafiction of its subversive or disruptive potential" (Stirling100). Metafiction is a powerful means to contribute to cultural self-examination within the postmodern period, and B. S. Johnson, narcissistic or otherwise, whether acknowledged as a minor or major author of this genre, is deserving of respect for his contribution.

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