

Háskóli Íslands

Hugvísindasvið

Enska

The Spark that Changes Colour

*Identity, Crisis and Rebirth in Zoë Strachan's Negative Space
and Jackie Kay's "Physics and Chemistry"*

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í ensku

Anna Þorbjörg Reynisdóttir

Kt.: 050580-3349

Leiðbeinandi: Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir

Mái 2016

Abstract

Identity is a recurring theme in the works of authors Zoë Strachan and Jackie Kay. This essay examines Strachan's novel *Negative Space* and Kay's short story "Physics and Chemistry," focusing on the two central characters' journey through identity metamorphosis. Their experience is compared to the Rebirth plot, one of Christopher Booker's seven archetypal narratives or "basic plots," with reference to Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung's writings on the process of individuation. The protagonists of the two works of fiction discussed here, Physics and Stella, move through four distinct phases on their journey toward self-realization. In phase one, as in the beginning of all Rebirth stories, a dark force of some kind has trapped them in a state of "living death," and each woman is alienated from her own true self, instead seeking refuge in a false identity or "persona." Physics, deeply in denial about essential aspects of her personal and sexual identity, constructs her persona around her role as a teacher, whereas Stella's passivity and extreme dependence on her brother have brought her to a point of occupying the "negative space" in her own life. In phase two, the false selves begin to crumble, as each woman faces the sudden loss of that on which she had based her pseudo-identity, and thus the dark spell is lifted. This is followed by the third phase, a period of identity crisis, uncertainty and experimentation with new ways of being and relating. Lastly, the fourth and final phase constitutes a new beginning, as each woman emerges from the individuation process transformed, metaphorically reborn into a new sense of self. While this is not an endpoint in itself, as individuation is a continuous process of self-discovery, both Stella and Physics' new identity is freer and more authentic than it was before.

Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Authors and Stories	4
2.1 Zoë Strachan and <i>Negative Space</i>	4
2.2 Jackie Kay and “Physics and Chemistry”	5
3. Jung and the Process of Individuation	6
4. Identity Metamorphosis and the Rebirth Plot.....	7
5. Stella and Physics’ Journey through Identity Crisis and “Rebirth”	9
5.1 Phase One: Alienation from Self.....	9
5.2 Phase Two: Loss of False Identity.....	14
5.3 Phase Three: Crisis and Experimentation.....	16
5.4 Phase Four: A New Beginning	18
6. Conclusion.....	21
Works Cited.....	22

1. Introduction

Identity is a complex and elusive phenomenon. Both universal and deeply personal at the same time, it is a deceptively ordinary term, which can nonetheless be difficult to define. The subject of countless stories, myths and legends throughout history, the search for self has also occupied many scholars, among them the Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist C. G. Jung, who wrote extensively on what he termed the process of individuation. Personal identity is a major theme in the two stories discussed here: Zoë Strachan's novel *Negative Space* and the short story "Physics and Chemistry" by Jackie Kay. Both stories were first published in 2002, and both are set in the United Kingdom at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The protagonists of these two works of fiction may at first seem quite dissimilar, as one of them is a middle-aged physics teacher and the other is an artists' model in her twenties. However, a closer look reveals that they have much in common. In the beginning, both women are disconnected from their true identity in some way, instead taking refuge in a "pseudo-identity" of sorts. One makes her brother the central point of gravity in her life, while the other builds her entire identity on her job as a teacher. This precarious state of affairs is shattered when each woman faces the loss of that on which she had based her sense of self. Through the course of their respective journeys, the two protagonists undergo a transformation resulting in a new beginning – they are, in a sense, reborn into a new personal identity. It is therefore interesting to compare their stories to the Rebirth plot, one of Christopher Booker's seven basic plots. At first alienated from their own identity, the two women are figuratively reborn into a new sense of self through the experience of loss and crisis as catalysts for self-discovery – a process analogous to Booker's Rebirth plot.

2. Authors and Stories

2.1 Zoë Strachan and *Negative Space*

Zoë Strachan was born in 1975 in Irvine, Scotland, grew up in Kilmarnock, and moved to Glasgow in 1992. As she states on her website, Strachan "wasn't a big fan of school" but graduated in 1996 with an MA (Hons) in Archaeology and Philosophy from the University of Glasgow, returning a couple of years – and various jobs – later for an MLitt in Creative Writing at the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde ("About Zoë").

Alongside her career as an author, Strachan has taught creative writing at Glasgow University since 2003. She lives in Glasgow with her partner, author Louise Welsh. A prolific and versatile writer, Strachan has written three novels, numerous short stories and essays, many articles and reviews for newspapers, radio drama, short dramatic pieces, full-length stage plays, and libretti. For her first novel, *Negative Space*, published in 2002, Strachan received a Betty Trask Award (2003). In addition, the novel was shortlisted for the Saltire First Scottish Book of the Year Award (2002), and longlisted for the SAC Book of the Year Award (2003). Identity, gender, and sexuality are ongoing themes in her work.

Negative Space tells the story of a young woman who tries to cope with the sudden death of her brother, a traumatic event that shakes her to the core and tears apart her already fractured world. She is quite passive and seems to lack a sense of personal identity and direction in her life, even as she watches her friends move forward and chase their dreams. She often feels like an outsider among her family and friends, especially after losing the person who was more than just a brother to her. In her intense grief, haunted by memories of him, she seeks comfort in alcohol, drugs, sex, and the anonymity of the city. Salvation is offered when a friend invites her to an artists' retreat in the Orkney Islands. There, surrounded by the vast landscape and new acquaintances, she is finally able to find peace, and to begin the process of healing and self-discovery.

2.2 Jackie Kay and “Physics and Chemistry”

Jackie Kay was born in Edinburgh in 1961 to young parents, a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father. Given up for adoption at birth, she grew up in Glasgow with her adopted parents, Helen and John Kay. She studied at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and read English at Stirling University. Kay has published novels, plays, collections of poetry and short stories, works for children, a prose book about Bessie Smith, and more. She has received numerous awards and honours for her work, including the Scottish Arts Council Book Award (1992), the Saltire Society Scottish First Book of the Year Award (1992), the Guardian Fiction Prize (1998), the Authors' Club First Novel Award (2000), the Cholmondeley Award (2003), and the CLPE Poetry Award (2008), as well as an MBE for services to literature (2006). In addition, she was appointed Scotland's Makar in March 2016. Kay teaches creative writing at Newcastle

University and lives in Manchester. Jackie Kay's experience of being adopted and growing up as a dark-skinned girl in a predominantly white community has influenced her work as a poet and author. The search for identity, within a personal as well as a cultural context, is a recurring theme in her work, along with the boundary between fiction and reality, the interplay of individuality and connectedness, and a rich empathy conveyed through stories and poems (Tranter).

The short story "Physics and Chemistry" was published in the collection *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (2002). This is the story of two women who are nicknamed Physics and Chemistry on account of the subjects they teach at school. Referred to as "the Science Spinsters" by pupils (Kay 218), they have been lovers and shared a home for many years. Even though all the teachers at school know and gossip about their relationship, no one talks openly about it, not even the women themselves – neither at school nor at home. This state of denial is broken one day when they are unexpectedly given notice from teaching due to a complaint from a prejudiced parent. This event sends their precariously constructed world toppling to the ground. As the narrator focuses more on Physics and reveals more of her internal experience, she will be the subject of the following discussion.

3. Jung and the Process of Individuation

One of the foremost scholars on the subject of identity was the Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). At the core of his work are certain archetypal figures that an individual encounters on the path toward self-realization, a process which Jung calls "individuation," as June Singer explains in her book *Boundaries of the Soul: The Practice of Jung's Psychology* (134). The major ones are as follows: The "persona" is the mask of appearances that a person holds up to society as the image of individuality that he would like himself and others to believe him to be (Singer 159). The danger is that a person may over-identify with this image and thus live "exclusively against the background of his own biography" (Jung, *Archetypes* 123). A darker side of the personality is the "shadow," which comprises all the aspects of ourselves that we refuse to acknowledge, or that we are ashamed of and judge as inferior or unacceptable, repressing them to the unconscious (Jung, *Archetypes* 284–5; Singer 165). The more rigidly a person identifies with the social image he or she is

trying to maintain, the more forcefully he or she will deny and suppress any part of the personality that is incompatible with it, thus increasing the tension between the persona and the shadow (Singer 165). The “anima” and “animus” are “those unconscious parts of ourselves that carry the mystery of the sex which is not ours” and which must be assimilated into our conscious awareness if we are to become whole individuals (134, 230). The aspect of the personality which “functions as the center of consciousness” is called the “ego” (15). Finally, there is the primary archetype representing wholeness, the “self” (134, 215). A gross simplification of the individuation process, then, is that it is a quest for self-knowledge and fulfilled potential, which entails the work of dismantling the false self (the persona), uncovering contents held in the unconscious (the shadow and the anima or animus) and integrating them into the conscious experience (134, 159, 239), thus becoming, in Jung’s words, “one’s own self” (qtd. in Singer 137). Jung states that “the more numerous and the more significant the unconscious contents which are assimilated into the ego, the closer the approximation of the ego to the self, even though this approximation must be a never-ending process” (*Aion* 23). Personal identity is therefore not a fixed and permanent condition that a person can reach once and for all, but rather a state of awareness involving continuous change, however subtle it may be. Furthermore, the journey of individuation often involves a period of crisis, as a person navigates between the false self and the true self (Singer 160).

The authors of the two works of fiction discussed in this essay present central characters who are actively engaged in this process of self-realization. Though their circumstances differ, both protagonists are essentially on the same journey toward wholeness and selfhood: through the course of their respective stories, we see each one of them dismantle her false self, bring formerly hidden aspects of her identity to light, and gradually become more of “her own self.”

4. Identity Metamorphosis and the Rebirth Plot

The protagonists of *Negative Space* and “Physics and Chemistry,” Stella and Physics, follow a very similar process on their journey toward a stronger sense of self. Both women go through four distinct phases or stages, as follows: In the beginning, both are unhappy and alienated from their own identity in some way. Next comes the sudden

loss of a person or circumstance to which they have anchored their identity. A crisis period of uncertainty and experimentation follows, during which the two women explore new landscapes – internal or external. Finally, they reach a stage of new beginnings, as they start to forge a new sense of self.

The journey outlined above is analogous to the process experienced by the protagonist of a particular kind of fictional narrative – the so-called Rebirth plot, which is one of the seven basic plots described by English journalist and author Christopher Booker. In his book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, first published in 2004, Booker presents seven archetypal narratives, or “basic plots,” arguing that all stories are – at least to some extent – based on the pattern of one or more of these narrative structures (5–6). The seven plots are: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. In a Rebirth story, the protagonist falls under the shadow of a “dark power” of some kind, whether it be from within or from an outside influence, and becomes imprisoned or frozen in what Booker calls a “state of living death” for some time, until the story reaches a point of crisis, followed by liberation or redemption “through the power of love” (193, 203). Examples include stories ranging from *Snow White* and *Beauty and the Beast* to *Silas Marner* and *A Christmas Carol* (Booker 194–5, 202).

The idea of comparing what can be called a “narrative of transformative crisis” in a person’s life to Booker’s Rebirth plot comes from psychologists Oliver Robinson and Jonathan Smith (“Metaphors...” 85). Table 1 (below), outlining the correlation between the stages of the Rebirth plot and the four phases of Stella and Physics’ respective journeys of “identity metamorphosis,” is based on Robinson and Smith’s comparison of their work to Booker’s Rebirth plot (92). While their four-phase division of the Rebirth journey differs from Booker’s summary of the plot into five phases (204), the integrity of the original sequence of events is maintained. The difference is that Robinson and Smith combine Booker’s first four phases – which all focus on the dark power imprisoning the protagonist – into one, and divide up the fifth stage (redemption), thus enabling a more detailed examination of the psychological transformation taking place in the protagonist’s life throughout the course of events, which suits this analysis very well.

The Rebirth Plot	Stella and Physics' "Rebirth"
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Trapped: the protagonist is trapped in a frozen state 2. Redemption: when all seems lost there is a hazardous escape, with the help of another key character 3. Liberation: the person frees herself from the place and mental space that defined Phase 1, and realises her better self 4. From darkness into light: the protagonist finds a new and authentic way of being and fulfils central task or destiny 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alienation from self: both women are unhappy, stuck in some way and disconnected from their true identity 2. Loss of false identity: the traumatic loss of what they were clinging to sets them free, with the support of other key characters 3. Crisis and experimentation: liberated from their pseudo-identities, the women explore new (internal and external) landscapes 4. A new beginning: they begin to form a new, more authentic identity

Table 1: The stages of the two analogous processes

5. Stella and Physics' Journey through Identity Crisis and "Rebirth"

5.1 Phase One: Alienation from Self

The Rebirth plot begins when a "dark force" of some kind enters the protagonist's life and traps him or her in a state of isolation and unhappiness. In this first phase, both our heroines have fallen under the influence of an internal or external circumstance which has caused them to lose touch with their own true identity. Hiding behind a false identity, their vitality is repressed and their lives are halted in some way. This leaves them trapped in what Booker calls "the state of living death: the flow of life frozen in suspension" (193).

The protagonist of *Negative Space* is profoundly alienated from her own identity. Indeed, the theme of personal identity and the search for self is a thread running through the whole story. As Strachan herself said about the novel in an interview, she "was really taken with the idea of taking this existential angst that men have been having for years, from Camus right through the Beat generation, and

exploring it through a young, female character” (quoted in Turner). The novel’s title is significant and clearly symbolic of this theme. A concept used in art and design, “negative space” is the empty space surrounding the subject(s) of the artwork, or between one part of the subject and another (whereas the subject itself occupies the “positive space”). These “negative spaces between shapes and masses [...] can be so adjusted as to enhance the action and character of the positive images” (“Painting”). The emptiness and absence suggested by the title indicate the young woman’s profound disconnection from her own sense of self. She is, in a way, the “negative space” in her own life, rather than the subject. Her sense of self is thus a capacity for holding the other and not herself. In this way, she becomes the space around her brother Simon and her best friend Alex, who occupy the “positive space” or subject position. They are the active ones, the agents, the ones who paint and photograph her, while she is only too happy to let them appropriate her physical self to suit their artistic requirements: she is “used to [...] people distorting [her] to suit themselves” (Strachan, *Negative Space* 108). In fact, she feels thoroughly disconnected from her physical body. She resents “being stuck in this lump of flesh” (78), viewing it as an object she would like to be able to shed at will (133). Working as an artists’ model, she is used to the art students not seeing her as a person but rather as a physical object over which they have as much right as she does (170). She has become alienated from her sense of self to the point that she avoids looking at “that other girl” in the mirror (155), and when she does, her own reflection looks merely “kind of familiar” (36). The narrative structure itself also reflects her fragmented identity, as it jumps back and forth in time, revealing a memory here and a snippet of another there. Moreover, it is significant that on the sign which greets them at their arrival in Orkney, her friend’s name is spelled out in full, while she is merely “+ FRIEND” – a being without personhood or identity (McCulloch 309; Strachan, *Negative Space* 194; Turner). Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, as others have pointed out (McCulloch 303, Turner), she remains anonymous throughout nearly the entire novel. It is not until the penultimate page, when she has at last begun to form a sense of self, that her name is revealed: Stella.

The symbolic title refers not only to Stella’s lack of presence and agency in her own life, it also symbolizes the emptiness of a life lacking any real meaning, purpose or depth. In fact, the young protagonist’s whole life can be viewed as “one large negative space” (Turner). The anonymity and absence are echoed in the big city in which she lives (Glasgow), where she uses drugs and alcohol as a means to escape from the

emptiness and amuses herself by pretending to be someone else (Strachan, *Negative Space* 156). Her job as a life model – work that requires her to stand still for long periods of time during which she frequently escapes into the world of memories (68) – symbolizes her immobility in life. The job is just a means to pay the rent, not a source of purpose or fulfilment for her, whereas Alex, Simon and her flatmate Ritchie have all found something to pursue with a passion. Stella feels like her life is going nowhere and envies the others for moving forward with their lives (72, 112, 178, 228). The lack of presence and depth is also echoed in Stella's personal and social life. Her relationship with her mother, stepfather and two stepsisters is distant and even somewhat antagonistic (13–14), as the mother's new family has effectively pushed the two older siblings to the periphery (Strachan, *Negative Space* 21–22; McCulloch 307). Furthermore, in place of an intimate romantic relationship, Stella engages in sexual encounters that mean “nothing” to her and merely serve as a distraction (Strachan, *Negative Space* 49, 95, 145), which is not uncommon for a person unsure of her identity (Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* 135). As she has also drifted away from her best friend Alex to the point of not even knowing her whereabouts, as well as having lost interest in her other friends whose “contingency” she now finds repulsive (Strachan, *Negative Space* 35), Stella's social life at this stage of her journey consists nearly exclusively of Simon and people she has met through him (176).

Stella's relationship with her brother is central to the story, and her complete dependence on him is the “dark spell” in her life, to use Booker's term (194). With only two years separating them in age, they have always been close, “like best pals, not just brother and sister,” as a friend observes (Strachan, *Negative Space* 43). Having found her job through Simon (158) and moved in with him and his flatmate (69), she has gradually merged her life with his. Simon's presence is woven into the very fabric of her daily life: he is the person with whom she feels a sense of belonging, the only person who understands her completely, and they even cross the line between siblings and lovers (35, 192). He becomes the centre of her world to the extent that even after he dies, she is haunted by the presence and memories of her “doppelgänger,” unwilling to let go (15). Her emotional dependence on Simon is such that she cannot bear the thought of living without him and tries to commit suicide (25–26). Her life is indeed “frozen in suspension” (Booker 193).

Physics, the protagonist of Jackie Kay's short story, falls under a different kind of “dark spell” that keeps her stuck and isolated, and in her case, the darkness comes

from both internal and external forces. Like Stella, Physics is disconnected from her own identity as a person, but rather than depending on someone else to hold the subject position in her life, she seeks refuge in a pseudo-identity. This is most tellingly indicated by her name. While Stella remains anonymous until the very end of her story, Physics' real name is never revealed. Instead, she is identified by a pseudonym derived from her position as a teacher. Whereas all the other characters in the story have real names, the narrator always refers to her by the alias "Physics," a practice which seems to echo her own tendency. During a heated conversation in Mr Smart's office, Physics spontaneously refers to her long-term partner as "Chemistry" to the uncomprehending headmaster (Kay 226), indicating that it is her ingrained habit to do so. The implication is that she also thinks of herself as "Physics" and thus bases her whole sense of self on her role as a teacher. This is her pseudo-identity, or "persona" to use Jung's term, the mask she uses to hide her authentic self from the world, and one manifestation of the "dark force" in her life.

The reason why she hides behind the mask is that she has internalized a powerfully oppressive external "dark force," which demands that certain essential aspects of her own identity be kept firmly suppressed. Her self-expression thus severely inhibited, this is another way in which she is out of touch with her own authentic self. "Every day, in her own silent way, Physics [keeps] something to herself," states the narrator (219), and the crucial "something" is her true self. An essential aspect of this is the fact that she is a lesbian, a fact which Physics hides from herself as well as everyone else. Deeply in denial about her own sexual orientation and, ironically for someone called Physics, quite alienated from her own physicality, she rigidly inhibits her sexual self-expression. Deprived of affection as a child and "never [...] hugged in her life until she met Chemistry," she is uncomfortable with displays of affection and does not even like her partner to touch her outside of bed (220). Moreover, even in bed, she leaves it to Chemistry to initiate their lovemaking (223), and though their nights of sexual intimacy bring Physics alive (224), "[n]ot a single word" has ever been spoken between them "about such nights" (223). She also refuses to acknowledge her own preference for a more masculine self-expression. There are hints of this throughout the story, ranging from their division of household tasks to Physics being "strong for a woman" (226) and the slight "moustache" that makes her look "like a man" (219). Further clues can be found in the language, such as Physics' occasional "cavalier" way of driving (224), as the word "cavalier" refers to a knight or a gentleman ("Cavalier"). The entire

sphere of sexuality, an essential aspect of Physics' identity, is thus firmly banished into what Jung calls the "shadow." Physics has "never ever said the dreaded word out loud for fear of it" (Kay 223), this word presumably being the word "lesbian," and the nature of Physics and Chemistry's relationship is never openly acknowledged: not to their co-workers who all know the truth, not in the company of their (also secretly) lesbian friends, not even between the two of them (218, 221, 223).

The oppressive "dark force" fuelling this conspiracy of silence is that of prejudice and discrimination, primarily represented by the parent who demands that Physics and Chemistry be dismissed, and the headmaster who complies. Physics has internalized this dark power and turned its oppressive force against herself, in addition to the external influence it wields. Prejudice, along with the threat it poses to them, is a constant presence in Physics and Chemistry's daily life. In fact, at home, each of them tells the other "some of the things she had pretended not to hear that day," and despite the initial "sympathy and hilarity," there are moments when "the weight of all the things [they have] listened to in silence move[s] around them like molecules" (219). But even though Physics is "unlit and dangerous" all day at school, like a chemistry experiment about to blow up (219), neither the anger at having to keep up the pretence, nor the pain of having to keep their love a secret, are ever openly acknowledged. When Chemistry pretends to be single rather than publicly admit the truth, Physics merely "fume[s] by the kettle" (218). In such a hostile environment, where homosexuality is viewed as a danger to the students and mere rumour is considered sufficient grounds for dismissal (225), it is no wonder that Physics would spend so much effort on maintaining secrecy and keep her pseudo-identity so rigidly in place.

The denial and repression leave Physics, along with her partner, living an isolated and narrow life, trapped in a state of self-generated imprisonment. After twenty-five years together, their life has become a familiar routine. Teaching at the same school, they seem to have no social life unrelated to work, which demonstrates just how much Physics has narrowed down her personal life to fit the "mask" she hides behind. Most of their free time they spend at home, just the two of them, trying to create "a semblance of a restaurant," because: "Why go out? Why ever go out?" (221–222). The repeated question suggests that, secretly, they would enjoy going out like other couples, but are afraid to do so, and instead remain imprisoned by the dark power of prejudiced oppression. Furthermore, having internalized the dark force, Physics is markedly more repressed than her partner. She barely speaks to anyone other than Chemistry and her students

(225), and whereas Chemistry is open and adventurous, Physics clings to stability. In fact, as the narrator states, she must be “forced to change” (220). These are foreshadowing words, but in this phase of the process, isolated, repressed and alienated from her own identity, Physics’ life is indeed, to quote Booker, “akin to living death” (194).

5.2 Phase Two: Loss of False Identity

In the next phase of a Rebirth story, having been trapped in a state of “physical or spiritual imprisonment” by the dark power, the protagonist is miraculously saved from the darkness by another key character and “the life-giving power of love” (Booker 194–195). At this point of their journey, each of the two women faces the loss of the person or circumstance around which she has constructed her pseudo-identity, as Stella’s brother dies suddenly and Physics is given notice from her teaching job. These two events, though painful catalysts of crisis, actually serve to liberate our heroines from the dark forces that previously held them trapped, and, with the support of people close to them, they now have an opportunity to move on with their lives.

When Physics, along with her partner, is unexpectedly dismissed from the teaching position on which her “persona” has been based, all seems lost, but, in fact, this dreaded event marks the beginning of her metaphorical rebirth. As Physics is fired because of rumours of her homosexuality, the dark force of prejudice and discrimination finally seems to gain the upper hand. However, when Mr Smart speaks “the dreaded word” aloud to Physics, the aspects of her identity that she had suppressed into the “shadow” of her unconscious are dragged into the light of her conscious awareness and the carefully constructed “persona” starts to crumble; consequently, she can no longer hide from the truth of who she is, and finally “being identified as lesbian proves ultimately liberating” (Strachan, “Is that a Scot...” 54). Thus, ironically, the intended punishment actually sets her free. At last forced to acknowledge the nature of her relationship with Chemistry, and catching a glimpse of her lover through the window while hearing that they are *both* dismissed, Physics “suddenly” – and symbolically – “[comes] to life” (Kay 225). Emboldened by the thought of her partner suffering injustice, her protective anger rises up and knocks her out of her rigid state. No longer fuming in silence, this time she reacts with an instinctive and surprising violence (226), as she opposes the authority of the dark power, represented by Mr Smart. Thus, she exhibits the “firmness of character to rise to the challenge of contending for [her lady],”

as befits the hero (or, in this case, heroine) of a Rebirth story (Booker 293), and begins to integrate her “repressed but vigorous and powerful side – the animus” (Singer 199) into her conscious awareness. “[A] voice [comes] out of her” (Kay 226), the voice of her authentic self-expression, shouting exactly what she wants to say to the headmaster, and, with that, she is reunited with her formerly alienated self. As she suddenly “let[s] go” of the headmaster’s collar (226), she simultaneously lets go of her false identity and all the effort she has been exerting in order to keep her true identity hidden. And “with her head held high, taking long, long strides down the corridor” (226), she walks toward the beginning of a new future with her partner, leaving the rigid and repressed “persona” behind her.

Whereas Physics has depended on her job as the basis of her false identity, Stella has depended on her brother. Having made Simon the focal point of her rather small world, Stella is utterly devastated when he dies suddenly from an aneurysm, but (as is the case for Physics at losing her job) Simon’s death marks the beginning of Stella’s journey toward authenticity and wholeness. Not only plagued by guilt for not having realized what was happening to Simon early enough to save him, and for “being alive in his absence” (Strachan, *Negative Space* 33–34, 60), Stella cannot fathom how her life can go on without him. It is a mystery to her how “[s]omething so cataclysmic can happen [...] without the shock waves knocking down everything else” (61). The shock of losing her brother forces her to acknowledge how desperately she has come to depend on him, and it is excruciating. But, as McCulloch points out, Simon’s death also “provides a catalyst to jolt her from routine [...] and opens a space to develop her potential” (307). She can feel herself “disintegrating;” still detached from her own reflection, and thus her own self, she can nevertheless sense that she is reaching a critical point: “Predictably it’s not even me in the mirror, it’s someone I don’t know [...] She’s distraught and it’s running through her mind that this time she really has cracked [...] This will not pass, this is it. She’s broken” (Strachan, *Negative Space* 124). Her old identity as the “negative space” in her own life is cracking. “Now he [is] caught in limbo,” she says about the recently departed Simon (59), when, really, it is she herself who is caught in limbo, caught between desperately wanting to hold onto the memory of her brother and the necessity of letting go of him in order to move on with her life. Simon had become the anchor to which she had bound her existence, and without him, she is like a boat drifting aimlessly (252). But she knows that it is up to her to take responsibility for herself and move on without him, painful and difficult though it may be (35).

Salvation comes in the form of an opportunity to accompany her best friend Alex to an artists' retreat in the Orkney Islands. Though change normally frightens her, Stella eventually accepts her friend's offer because she knows that she has "nothing to stay for [and] nothing to lose" (163). As the novel opens with Stella and Alex setting off on their journey toward Orkney, the narrative structure emphasizes the new beginning that this trip represents for Stella. The darkness is mostly behind her, visited only in retrospect through flashbacks in the narrative, as she begins to break free from the past. Leaving the city, she feels relief; now there is "no going back" (2). While this may be a daunting prospect, she has her confident and capable friend Alex by her side as she embarks on her journey toward the future.

5.3 Phase Three: Crisis and Experimentation

Liberated from the oppressive dark power which held their false identity in place, Physics and Stella now move into a period of crisis, uncertainty and exploration. At this point of their respective journeys, the two women are standing at a crossroads, released from their false selves, but unsure of who they are yet, an experience known as "identity crisis." As June Singer writes, when the mask of the false self becomes damaged, "[t]he lack of a personal sense of identity [...] may lead to a serious crisis. And yet such a crisis is almost always necessary sooner or later in the individuation process, because until the false self is recognized the true self cannot be known" (160). According to psychologist Erik Erikson, identity crisis can manifest itself as "a kind of 'second birth,' [...] a crucial time or an inescapable turning point for better *or* for worse" (*A Way of Looking at Things* 679). Indeed, both women experience this stage in their development as a time of uncertainty, which can be both frightening and exciting, as the release of the old opens up the possibility for something new. They also begin to engage in what Erikson calls "role experiments," which serve a purpose in their transition toward a stronger sense of self (qtd. in Johansson 70).

Just as Stella feels relief at leaving the city for Orkney, Physics feels "a strange relief" at being out of the school (Kay 227), and out of the metaphorical closet. While she is released from the oppression of having to hide her true self behind a restrictive mask, she holds that the oppressive dark power of prejudice and discrimination previously had over her is loosening greatly. Whereas they previously "smiled small scientific smiles" whenever the subject of marriage was mentioned in the staff room,

forced to keep their own partnership of twenty-five years a secret, Physics and Chemistry now hold hands in public (217, 226). Furthermore, in private, Physics is much less inhibited and more open to new experiences: kissing her partner in the kitchen while some exotic food sizzles in the wok (226) is far removed from her former rigidity and caution about change. Most importantly, though, she is clearly embracing and expressing her sexuality, integrating the aspects of her identity that formerly were held in the “shadow.” Between her symbolic act of giving away all her skirts, presumably to wear only attire of a masculine variety – thus rejecting socially prescribed norms in favour of a more authentic self-expression – and an impromptu lovemaking session on the living room floor, Physics’ life has indeed become “experimental [and] unpredictable” (226).

Whereas the loss of the false identity is quite liberating for Physics, it is somewhat uncomfortable at first for Stella. Leaving the confines of the city behind for the vast wilderness of Orkney, she suddenly has the physical and mental space to explore her own inner landscape without the usual distractions. Arriving at the retreat, “miles from anywhere,” she can “feel the days stretching out in front of [her], empty” (Strachan, *Negative Space* 198). Stella’s substitution of the cramped conditions of the cityscape for wide open spaces of land and sea is symbolic; as McCulloch writes, the author utilizes this “wild northern hinterland in order to allow her heroine to explore a new emerging selfhood” (307). Though at first feeling “lost” and unsure of who she is without the familiar, material objects around “to define [her]” and having “no idea what [she] will do” after her sojourn in Orkney ends, Stella agrees to let go of the flat she has shared with Ritchie for “a clean break” from the past (Strachan, *Negative Space* 151, 178). This willingness, of someone previously so resistant to change, to step into the unknown is a sign of the internal exploration that has begun. Cocooned by the new landscape, Stella becomes physically healthier (242), and more secure in herself as she practices small acts of independence, such as going to the hostel’s bathroom on her own (197). After a long period of grief and despair, the new scenery reflects and invites the unfolding of a new perspective in Stella’s mind, opening up space for new possibilities and for people other than Simon. A sign of hope and curiosity awakening within her is her observation that even a “grey day” in Orkney seems to have “more to it” (217), and while driving through the open landscape with Alex, Stella realizes that she feels “content,” and is surprised to be enjoying herself (227).

During this time, Stella also begins to experiment with a new way of relating to people and to understand how she herself has contributed to the feeling of emptiness in her life. Used to thinking of herself as an outsider who does not fit in, Stella gradually comes to realize that she herself has, at least to some extent, been responsible for the disconnection by avoiding conversation and keeping people at arm's length (158, 243, 253). "Looking back I seemed to have put more effort into repulsing people than I ever had into attracting them" (255), she reflects with a growing self-awareness and maturity. As she begins to lower her defenses, she "surprise[s] [her]self by finally volunteering information about [her]self" (238), and even extends an olive branch to her mother in the form of a postcard (217). Thus the "dark spell" of her dependency on Simon is beginning to lose its hold on her as she explores these new and unfamiliar terrains within and around her.

5.4 Phase Four: A New Beginning

In a Rebirth story, while the protagonist is held captive by the dark force, his or her internal and external experience is that of "coldness, hardness, immobility, constriction, sleep, darkness, sickness, decay, isolation, torment, despair [or] lack of love" (Booker 204). This is an apt description of Physics' rigidity and isolation, repressing essential aspects of her true self and living inside of a constrictive false identity. Likewise, it captures Stella's hollow existence in her brother's shadow, first depending on him and then feeling tormented after his death, trying to escape from the pain into oblivion. Conversely, as the dark power's influence over the protagonist loosens, there is "warmth, softness, movement, liberation, awakening, light, health, growth, joining together, happiness, hope [and] love" (204). This is the state of being into which our heroines transition as they begin to form a new identity, more authentic and more liberated than their former false selves.

During her stay in Orkney, where she has both time and space to process her grief, Stella is finally able to step out of her brother's shadow and begin to live her own life. Gradually, she gains perspective and a sense of peace about Simon's death (Strachan, *Negative Space* 232), and becomes ready to relinquish her emotional grip on him. Though she finds it "strange" to think of herself as "distinct from Simon" (239), this very awareness indicates that she is beginning to do just that. The St Christopher pendant symbolizes Stella's dependent relationship with her brother in the absence of a

strong sense of self, as they had both received matching pendants as children, but the chain had snapped on hers so she lost it, and later started wearing his instead (129). The symbolism continues later on, as Stella takes off the pendant during an intimate moment with her new lover, Iram, who is starting to replace Simon as Stella's significant other, the one who occupies her thoughts (279, 283). This beginning lesbian relationship serves as a further signal of Stella's renewal of identity (Innes 305). In a final symbolic act of release, Stella lays the memory of her brother to rest by burying the silver pendant in a private ceremony in Orkney (Strachan, *Negative Space* 289–290), thus setting herself free to move on with her life and focus on becoming her own self. Significantly, it is only after this ceremony that her name is revealed. With the burial ceremony, Stella leaves the darkness of her “stained” relationship with her brother in the past (192), and as she moves on with her life, she instead brings with her the memory of the innocence and the magical quality of their shared childhood (295).

As Stella progressively lets go of her dependence on Simon, her sense of self grows steadily stronger. Indeed, according to Booker, the dark power is in fact a metaphor which indicates a developmental “state of incompleteness” within the protagonist herself – in this case, Stella – and can only be overcome when she is “finally ready to emerge to maturity” (Booker 283). The title of the final chapter is meaningful in this respect: immediately following the private burial ceremony, the words “Still Standing” suggest a gently humorous surprise at the fact that she did not collapse after that definitive act of separation, but instead is quite capable of standing on her own two feet. This is rather a momentous discovery for a young woman who used to be “more than willing to drop responsibility for [her]self onto anyone else” (Strachan, *Negative Space* 73). In addition, these words are the reversal of “standing still,” which is what Stella was doing while imprisoned by the dark force of dependency, fearing and trying to avoid change, whereas now she finds herself nonchalantly planning a new life in London and welcoming the unknown (291–292).

Stella's self-esteem gradually increases as her authentic self begins to emerge. Previously insecure and used to thinking of herself as insignificant and without talent or anything to contribute to a conversation (191, 196, 201, 211), she is beginning to take pride in her modelling work (292), and to recognize that she has knowledge of her own that she can share with others (226). Moreover, enveloped by the wilderness and the community of artists, Stella begins to feel “more of a person” than a woman, with an odd sense of “release” (257), which marks her transition from acting within a gender

role to simply being herself. The new haircut which “exposes [her] face” is symbolic for her transformation toward greater authenticity (253). Another important token of her path to wholeness and selfhood is her name, “stella” being the Latin word for “star” (“Stellar”), as the star is a symbol of the Self (Booker 306). At one point she is looking for a shooting star to wish on (Strachan, *Negative Space* 214), and yet her name suggests that she might just be that star herself. Also significant is the fact that, as Stella’s name is disclosed at last, she speaks it to Iram on the telephone, having made the call herself (294). In this way, the emergence of her identity occurs in tandem with her becoming more of an agent in her own life. Thus, the space surrounding Stella in Orkney, which at first seems like a frightening emptiness, gradually becomes the “negative space” around Stella herself as she steps into the “subject position,” or the “positive space,” of her own life.

Physics’ experience of transitioning from darkness into light and forming a new identity is somewhat different from that of Stella. Interestingly, rather than reveal her true self completely, Physics switches from one persona to another. Now running a wool shop instead of teaching children, Physics turns into Plain. (In correlation, her partner gains the alias Purl, both names referring to knitting stitches.) She is again hiding behind a persona constructed around a particular job, but at least this time she is happy, more authentic and self-expressed than before, and freely embracing her own sexuality. She can now also be seen as a model for other homosexual women (and men), as by daring to come out of the metaphorical closet, she inspires others to do the same. This requires courage on her part, in light of the “dark power” which she has just overcome, for, as Zoë Strachan writes, the degree of homophobia in most parts of contemporary Scotland is such that even “[s]imple gestures of affection [...] require a certain amount of bravery” (“Is that a Scot...” 53). Thus, by her valiant example, Physics brings more “light” to the whole metaphorical “kingdom.” The reason for her transition to a new persona instead of a full revelation of her innermost self may be that her journey is simply not over yet, and in fact never will be. The “spark” between Physics and Chemistry – now Plain and Purl – will likely continue to “change colour” (Kay 227) as long as they live, since, to revisit Jung’s statement, the journey toward selfhood is “a never-ending process” (*Aion* 23). Erikson agrees with Jung on this fluid quality of personal identity, stating that it is “never ‘established’ as an ‘achievement’ in the form of a personality armor, or of anything static and unchangeable” (*Identity, Youth and Crisis* 24). Furthermore, according to Robinson and Smith, the metamorphosis of

identity following a crisis period does not involve changes “from fragmented inconsistency to solid consistency, but rather [...] away from an externally controlled self to an inwardly directed and relational self” (“The Stormy Search...” 137). This is a description well suited to Physics’ new identity as an openly gay woman happily running a business and sharing a passionate life with her long-term partner.

6. Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in this essay, Zoë Strachan’s *Negative Space* and Jackie Kay’s “Physics and Chemistry” present main characters who are comparable in their progress toward a new sense of self, a journey analogous to Christopher Booker’s Rebirth plot. Kay and Strachan portray characters who have become disconnected from their true identity and are trapped in a state that Booker calls “life frozen in suspension,” which is the starting point of all Rebirth stories. Here we find Physics deeply in denial about fundamental aspects of her personal and sexual identity, whereas Stella’s passivity and extreme dependence on her brother have brought her to a point of occupying the “negative space” in her own life. However, despite their initial fear of the unknown, both women courageously embark upon a path of growth and self-realization. As the authors lead their protagonists through traumatic loss and crisis, the journey of rebirth is set in motion. Liberated from the frozen state and their false identity, Physics and Stella begin to explore new ways of being and relating, finally to emerge transformed, reborn into a new sense of self. While this is not an endpoint in itself, as personal identity is fluid and individuation is a continuous process of self-discovery, both Stella and Physics’ new identity is freer and more authentic than it was before. The state of “living death” has been exchanged for one of hope, new possibilities and greater happiness. Both women have made many positive changes in their internal as well as external worlds, and are embracing new experiences in the company of people they love. As Erikson describes an “optimal sense of identity” as “a feeling of being at home in one’s body, a sense of ‘knowing where one is going,’ and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count” (*Identity, Youth and Crisis* 165), according to this definition, our two heroines have successfully navigated the transition “from death to life,” (Booker 205) which is the very essence of a Rebirth story.

Works Cited

- Booker, Christopher. *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. 2004. London: Continuum, 2010. Print.
- “Cavalier.” *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Gramercy, 1989. Print.
- Erikson, Erik H. *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. London: Faber and Faber, 1968. Print.
- . *A Way of Looking at Things*. New York: Norton, 1987. Print.
- Innes, Kirsten. “Mark Renton’s Bairns: Identity and Language in the Post-*Trainspotting* Novel.” *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*. Ed. Berthold Schoene. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. 301–309. Print.
- Johansson, Thomas. *The Transformation of Sexuality: Gender and Identity in Contemporary Youth Culture*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007. Print.
- Jung, C. G. *Aion*. New York: Pantheon, 1959. Print.
- . *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. 1959. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968. Print.
- Kay, Jackie. “Physics and Chemistry.” *Why Don’t You Stop Talking*. 2002. London: Picador, 2011. 215–227. Print.
- McCulloch, Fiona. “‘Cross that bridge’: journeying through Zoe Strachan’s *Negative Space*.” *Journal of Gender Studies*. 17.4 (2008): 303–319. EBSCOhost. PDF file. 6 July 2015.
- “Painting.” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 21 Oct 2015.
- Robinson, Oliver and Jonathan Smith. “Metaphors and Metamorphoses: Narratives of Identity During Times of Crisis.” *Narrative, Memory and Identities*. Eds. D. Robinson, P. Fisher, T. Yeadon-Lee, S. J. Robinson and P. Woodcock. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, 2009. 85–94. Google Scholar. PDF file. 25 Sept 2015.
- . “The Stormy Search for Self in Early Adulthood: Developmental Crisis and the Dissolution of Dysfunctional Personae.” *The Humanistic Psychologist*. 38.2 (2010): 120–145. EBSCOhost. PDF file. 25 Sept 2015.

Singer, June. *Boundaries of the Soul: The Practice of Jung's Psychology*. 1972. New York: Doubleday, 1994. Print.

"Stellar." *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Gramercy, 1989. Print.

Strachan, Zoë. "About Zoë." Zoë Strachan. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 March 2015.
⌈<http://www.zoestrachan.com/>⌋.

---. "Is that a Scot or am Ah wrang?" *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*. Ed. Berthold Schoene. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. 51–56. Print.

---. *Negative Space*. London: Picador, 2002. Print.

Tranter, Susan. "Jackie Kay: Critical Perspective." *British Council Literature*. British Council, 2008. Web. 18 Oct 2015.

Turner, Nick. "Zoe Strachan: Critical Perspective." *British Council Literature*. British Council, 2010. Web. 13 March 2015.