

Understanding Ketty's Psychological Transformation through Amnesia as Part of Infantile Memory in *The Mystery of Me*

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Abstract: This study explores the psychological transformation of Ketty, the main character in *The Mystery of Me* by Karen McCombie, through the lens of Carl Jung's concept of infantile memory. The research aims to examine how amnesia in the story reflects deeper unconscious struggles and contributes to Ketty's identity reconstruction. A qualitative method and psychoanalytic approach were applied to analyze textual data, focusing on key moments that reveal Ketty's emotional disconnection, symbolic imagery, and evolving self-awareness. The findings reveal three major aspects of amnesia: Ketty's unconscious rejection of her past self, the emergence of symbolic fragments, which is butterflies as manifestations of infantile memory, and amnesia as a medium for the unconscious to surface and initiate personal growth. These elements demonstrate how memory loss functions not merely as a cognitive impairment but as a meaningful narrative tool that reveals the character's inner conflict and gradual individuation. This study differs from previous works by offering a Jungian reading of amnesia, emphasizing the symbolic and emotional processes involved in self-discovery. The research contributes to literary and psychological discourse by showing how unconscious memory and symbolic elements shape the formation of identity in trauma-affected characters.

Keywords: amnesia, unconscious, psychoanalysis, jungian theory

INTRODUCTION

Amnesia is a condition that affects a person's ability to remember information, whether it involves forgetting past experiences, losing personal details, or struggling to form new memories. According to Kopelman (2000), amnesia refers to a disproportionate loss of memory in the context of relatively preserved intellectual functioning and is often associated with damage to the brain's memory systems. Baddeley (2020) describes amnesia as a condition involving unusually severe memory loss or disruption that exceeds the level of

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normal forgetting. It may affect a person's ability to remember past events (retrograde amnesia), to form new memories (anterograde amnesia), or both. In some cases, the memory loss is temporary, while in others, it can be long-term or permanent. There are several causes of amnesia. One well-established cause of chronic amnesia is thiamine deficiency, particularly when it leads to Wernicke encephalopathy and its residual form, Korsakoff syndrome, which is characterized by severe and often irreversible memory impairment ((Arts et al., 2017). Amnesia can also be caused by psychological trauma, where a person experiences intense emotional stress or shock, such as after a tragic or violent event. In such cases, the memory loss is not linked to brain damage but rather to the mind's reaction to distress. This is known as psychogenic or dissociative amnesia. Other possible causes include medical conditions like Alzheimer's disease or epilepsy, substance abuse or side effects from certain medications, and a lack of oxygen to the brain, which may occur during incidents like a heart attack or near-drowning. Each of these factors can disrupt the brain's ability to process, store, or retrieve memories.

This understanding of amnesia helps to frame Ketty's condition in *The Mystery of Me*, a short story by Karen McCombie that follows a teenage girl waking up in a hospital with no memory of who she is. After a serious accident, Ketty finds herself surrounded by people who know her, such as her friend and family, but she feels emotionally disconnected from the version of herself they describe. She is told by her friends and family that she was once a confident and outgoing girl, but Ketty struggles to recognize herself in the description others provide. As she tries to piece together her life, Ketty faces the challenge of reconciling the person she used to be with the person she has become after the accident. Her inability to recall her past causes emotional distress, as she feels increasingly alienated from her former self and the people around her. Ketty's amnesia becomes a metaphor for her internal struggle to understand who she is now and who she was before. Throughout the story, she attempts to regain her memories and make sense of her fractured identity. However, she remains caught between her past self, who turned out to be a bully, and the person she wants to become, as she no longer resonates with the person she used to be. Her experience aligns with what is defined as retrograde amnesia, as she struggles to retrieve personal memories from before the incident, including important parts of her identity and relationship. However, the story also hints at something deeper. Ketty's amnesia is not just a physical or medical issue, but a disruption that reflects, "I look like me. But I don't feel like me," revealing the emotional distance between her current self and the version of herself that others remember. The story brings into question amnesia as a depiction of Ketty's internal struggle between her past self and her unconscious desire.

What happens to Ketty might be explained by Carl Jung's concept. He proposed the concept of infantile memory in *Man and His Symbol* as symbolic anchors from early life that continue to shape us unconsciously. His view on this concept differs from Freud's, which Jung, in the same book, describes as being caused by repression, with painful memories pushed into the unconscious. Jung perceives this concept as symbolic images that reflect deeper psychic truths, in which they can emerge as an identity crisis. Thus, this theory can be applied in analyzing the role of amnesia as a depiction of Ketty's internal struggle. As she discovers that her past self, before the accident, was a bully, she experiences an identity

crisis and is unable to reconcile her current self with the actions of her former self. Possibly archetypal, such as feeling lost, reborn, or abandoned, these memories serve as a way the unconscious communicates a need for integration to connect her past and present selves. When someone is in the state of infantile memory, or often known as amnesia, the memories are not always accurate recollections of events. These memories then serve as a gateway to unconscious content, especially to unresolved conflict. As they can resurface in crises such as amnesia, these memories often symbolize a deeper truth regarding identity.

Previous studies in analyzing the concept of amnesia have been extensively explored. Taba & Rahayu (2025) explore the psychological effects of Christine Lucas's amnesia in *Before I Go to Sleep*, which focuses on the impact it has on her identity and relationship. Aulia & Sari (2024) examine the portrayal of dissociative amnesia and the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego in Elly Conway's character in the film *Argylle*, but it uses Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Ramadhani et al. (2024) study the psychological well-being of Maori Hino, a character with anterograde amnesia in *Even if This Love Disappears From the World Tonight*, using Carol Ryff's framework to analyze how she maintains well-being despite her condition. Shakir & Ullah (2022) analyze the traumatic memory and postcolonial amnesia experienced by Fatimah Asghar in *Finding the Hammam*, which explores how her autobiographical narrative reflects the lingering impact of colonial and postcolonial histories through the lens of trauma theory. However, analysis of this concept through Jung's lens is still relatively underexamined.

Therefore, this research presents a deeper understanding of how Jungian theory, particularly the notions of the unconscious, identity, and symbolic imagery, can be applied to characters experiencing amnesia. This research differs from previous studies as it sees amnesia not only as a medical condition in the story, but also as a symbol of deeper mental struggles and a way to explore the character's true identity. By analyzing the psychological dimensions of memory loss through Jung's framework, this study contributes to broader literary and psychological discussions on identity formation and the influence of repressed memories on the self. Moreover, it provides valuable insight on helping youth navigate psychological trauma and the process of finding their true identity.

METHOD

In this research, a qualitative approach is used to observe the role of amnesia as a depiction of Kitty's internal struggle. A qualitative method is generally explained as a technique that involves observing someone's words, writings, or actions in order to generate descriptive data for a study (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 7). According to Flick, qualitative research is becoming more popular in psychology and other social sciences (Flick, 2022). The research focused on analyzing Kitty's behaviours, interactions, and physiological expressions, using detailed observation and interpretation of the narrative. To understand how amnesia acted as a metaphor for her psychological issues, in-depth research and textual analysis were conducted. Data were collected through direct observations of the character's development in the text, followed by a comprehensive review of relevant literature on the portrayal of memory loss in psychological and literary contexts.

This research used a psychoanalytic approach to find out the role of amnesia as an important aspect of the protagonist's identity formation in *The Mystery of Me*. There are several steps in the data collecting process of this research. The first was to reread the novel thoroughly to gain a deeper understanding of the story. Second, collecting data related to Ketty's amnesia was mandatory. All the unnecessary data was then proceeded to be removed in order to narrow the scope of analysis. The final step is putting the collected data into different categories in the data collection table. After gathering the data, the researchers continued by interpreting and examining how amnesia was portrayed in *The Mystery of Me*, using Carl Jung's idea of infantile memory. The analysis focused on how the main character's memory loss was connected to early unconscious experiences that influenced her sense of self. To support the analysis, important details from the novel were included, as well as other secondary sources such as book references and related journal articles. At last, the researchers provided a conclusion based on the findings.

RESULTS

The study identified three major psychological dimensions of amnesia in the character of Ketty in *The Mystery of Me*. First, Ketty experiences an unconscious rejection of her past self, seen in her emotional discomfort and dissociation from the person others say she used to be. Second, symbolic fragments such as butterflies and emotional reactions to characters like Otis act as representations of infantile memory, reflecting how her unconscious attempts to communicate hidden truths. Third, amnesia functions as a space where Ketty's unconscious desires begin to surface, showing her slow process of transformation through emotionally charged memories. These findings align with Jung's theory of individuation and symbolic imagery in the unconscious.

DISCUSSION

Amnesia serves as an important element to show how the protagonist, Ketty, deals with the truth that contradicts the kind of person she used to be in *The Mystery of Me*. Therefore, this research focuses on finding the significance of amnesia in shaping Ketty's identity transformation and emotional journey throughout the narrative. In this section, the analysis is divided into three subsections. The first one is Amnesia as a way for the unconsciousness to express rejection of the past self. The second is symbolic fragments as the true form of infantile memories. Lastly, amnesia as an opportunity for unconscious desire to surface. Analysing these three aspects of the story, therefore, offers a deeper understanding of how amnesia functions not only as a narrative device but also as a psychological metaphor.

1. Unconscious Rejection of The Past Self

Ketty's amnesia represents a psychic refusal where she unconsciously does not want to return to a version of herself, she no longer identifies with. According to Jung & Hull (2023), human beings are fundamentally always intertwined with the past, present, and future. Unconscious experiences are divided into two types: personal unconscious, which is related to the individual's personal experience, and collective unconscious, which stems from the collective experiences of individuals since birth. The narration "Everyone says, though, that I ended up the same old Ketty. Not that I know who the old Ketty is ... I don't

really remember, like I don't remember the crash." (p. 3), shows her personal unconscious experience, where she rejects her past self. She feels a deep sense of discomfort as she is confused about how she should identify herself.

People with amnesia, particularly those experiencing dissociative or trauma-induced memory loss, often avoid confronting the truth, not because of the factual content of the memories themselves, but because of the overwhelming emotional distress attached to them. In *The Mystery of Me*, this internal conflict is captured in Ketty's reflection: "I feel like there's stuff no one will tell me, but I don't want to ask. I'm scared that the answer will upset me" (p.15). This suggests that Ketty's unconscious fear is not rooted in the unknown itself, but in the emotional turmoil the truth might provoke. Brewin (2001) reinforces this perspective by explaining that traumatic memories, when recalled, can evoke intense feelings of shame, guilt, or horror, which individuals may not be emotionally equipped to process (p. 384). These reactions make the act of remembering itself a threat to psychological stability. Consequently, avoidance functions as a defense mechanism, enabling individuals to distance themselves from memories that might conflict with their identity or inner coherence: "these memories are avoided because they are distressing or conflict with important aspects of the self" (p. 360-366). According to Grey et al. (2001), the predominant emotional responses in such cases involve fear, helplessness, and horror, although shame may also be experienced, albeit less frequently. Nevertheless, despite Ketty's efforts to avoid confronting the truth, traces of her past begin to surface through interactions and social dynamics, making avoidance increasingly difficult.

This growing tension is further revealed through her shifting social interactions, particularly when Ketty starts noticing subtle signs that her friendships might not be as wholesome as others claim. Following that, the data "'The thing is, it's Daisy's birthday tomorrow, and she's going to have a big picnic in the park to celebrate. Loads of people in our year will be there.' *Not me or Ardele or Urmi, I think. We haven't been invited*" (p. 24) shows that Ketty senses something is wrong. She still has not found out that she used to be a bully. However, the fact that Ketty and the people others say were her best friends were not invited to Daisy's birthday might suggest that they were disliked among their classmates.

"Ardele and Urmi have told me we normally go out in a big gang and walk up to the sandwich shop on the High Street. They say it's a total laugh.

I want to have a total laugh. I want to have fun and chat and gossip. But now that I've left my Spanish class early and I'm waiting for Ardele and Urmi in Reception, I'm not so sure." (p. 16)

Ketty's internal conflict becomes increasingly evident as she begins to emotionally distance herself from her supposed close friends, Adele and Urmi. Despite being told that they used to enjoy each other's company, "a total laugh," Ketty's lack of enthusiasm and growing uncertainty suggest a sense of dissociation. Her statement, "I want to have a total laugh. I want to have fun and chat and gossip," sounds more like a performance of expected behavior than genuine excitement. The repetition of "I want" implies a desire to reconnect with a version of herself she does not truly recognize. This is further emphasized when she

reflects, “now that I’ve left my Spanish class early and I’m waiting for Ardele and Urmi in Reception, I’m not so sure” (p.16). The instant speculation indicates a subconscious disconnection, implying that even though Ketty is making an effort to conform to the life that others have portrayed to her, it no longer feels right.

This emotional unease can be understood through the lens of psychological dissociation, a defense mechanism that arises in response to trauma, where individuals become detached from their thoughts, memories, or sense of identity (Holmes et al., 2005). Ketty’s experience also aligns with the concept of self-alienation, in which individuals perceive a disconnection between their present self and their past identity, especially when that past identity carries negative or unresolved emotional weight (Wilson & Ross, 2001). In Ketty’s case, the dissonance between who she is now and who she used to be may signal a subconscious rejection of her previous behaviors, particularly if they are tied to guilt or social harm. Thus, even in the absence of explicit memory, her body and emotions seem to “remember” what the mind cannot, triggering discomfort in social situations that once felt familiar.

2. Symbolic Fragments of Infantile Memory

In *The Mystery of Me*, Ketty’s emotional journey unfolds not through factual recollection but through subtle, affecting moments that evoke an uncanny sense of familiarity. This phenomenon aligns with Carl Jung’s (2014) theory of symbolic fragments of infantile memory, emotional traces retained by the unconscious that are detached from narrative clarity but saturated with psychological intensity. For Jung, these symbolic fragments are the “true form” of infantile memory: they do not preserve the actual content of past experiences but rather their emotional tone (Jung, 2014, p. 271). In the context of memory loss, these affective fragments function as psychic anchors that help reconstruct identity when autobiographical memory is unavailable. A pivotal example occurs when Otis, a seemingly peripheral character, extends a simple invitation to Ketty:

“Do you want to come with me instead, Ketty?” Otis asks. “I’m going to have my sandwich in the park and listen to my music.”

“How does that sound?” Stella asks. “I can tell your friends that you changed your mind.”

“It sounds ... good,” I say, and I feel the panic ebb away. (p.21)

The emotional relief she experiences is not tied to any conscious knowledge of who Otis is or what he represents, but to a symbolic emotional association with body-based memory of safety, ease, and trust. According to Jung's theory, this type of moment originates from the unconscious, where "life experiences are held in the form of emotional tones rather than events" (Jung & Hull, 2023, p. 162).

The significance of such fragments is heightened when Ketty reflects, “I feel the happiest I’ve been since I can remember, which is basically forever in my case.” (p. 22). The disproportionate intensity of this emotional high, coming from a brief, mundane encounter, suggests that it is not the act itself that holds meaning, but what it symbolizes on a deeper

psychic level. As stated by Stern (2004), early affective experiences, especially those related to emotional attunement, are stored as “implicit relational knowledge” and can be reactivated by present-day relational cues (p. 82). Otis’s non-threatening presence and emotional availability serve as catalysts for Ketty’s affective memory to resurface, even if her explicit autobiographical memory remains fragmented.

Ketty's internal statement, "I can trust him," is the result of this resurfacing. "Trust him with the truth" (p. 24). This moment exemplifies the way symbolic fragment’s function: they bring forth not clarity about the past, but an instinctive orientation toward safety and connection in the present. The trust she feels is not cognitively reasoned; rather, it is rooted in a pre-verbal, embodied memory of emotional safety. Brewin et al. (1996) explain that such emotionally encoded memory systems can influence perspectives and behavior even in the absence of conscious recall, particularly in trauma-affected individuals (pp. 670-672).

However, symbolic fragments are inherently unstable, often coexisting with doubt and confusion. This is evident later in the text when Ketty contradicts her earlier instinct: “Otis? He’s not really my friend” (p. 37). The dissonance here may stem from external narratives conflicting with Ketty’s affective impressions. Jung & Hull (2023) notes that symbolic fragments are part of the psyche’s archetypal rhythm, often surfacing in ways that seem illogical to the ego but are deeply coherent within the unconscious (p. 147). Ketty’s confusion reveals a tension between what she is told to believe and what she feels, between the social script and the emotional undercurrent. Importantly, symbolic fragments also serve a reconstructive function. As Van der Kolk (2014) explains, trauma fragments memory and identity, but affective resonance, feeling safe, seen, or joyful, can become the first step in healing and reintegration (p. 216). In this sense, Ketty’s fleeting moments of calm and happiness are not insignificant; they are the foundational building blocks of a post-amnesiac identity. Though these fragments do not restore factual continuity, they allow the psyche to reassemble itself around new emotional truths.

Thus, Ketty’s narrative in *The Mystery of Me* illustrates that memory does not solely reside in the act of remembering events, but in how the body and emotions “remember” experiences. These symbolic fragments of infantile memory, intuitive reactions, emotional surges, and inexplicable trust reveal the psyche’s effort to reconcile identity in the face of amnesia. As Jung (2014) posits, these symbolic elements serve as “bridges” between the conscious and unconscious, between past and present, ultimately guiding the self toward coherence.

3. Amnesia as an Unconscious Desire to Surface.

Jung’s idea of amnesia perceives it as an opportunity for individuation when the ego steps back and the unconscious steps forward. In other words, memory loss allows hidden parts of the self, especially those rooted in the unconscious, to emerge and guide personal growth. Through this process, the individual begins to confront repressed experiences, symbolic images, and inner conflicts, which can ultimately lead to a more complete and integrated sense of identity.

Butterflies...

Oh!

“Ketty?” Otis says. “Are you OK? You don’t look good.”

“I just...” I begin, then I stop and shake my head.

It was so nearly there as i watched the butterflies, a memory came so close
I almost touched it. (p. 24)

The data above serves as evidence of how the butterflies act as a symbolic trigger from the unconscious, evoking a repressed memory that lies just beneath the surface of consciousness. The sudden appearance of butterflies and the emotional response they provoke suggest that they are not just random visual details, but deeply symbolic cues tied to Ketty’s unconscious mind. This near-retrieval of memory shows the ego’s tentative engagement with the unconscious. Butterflies are often associated with metamorphosis. As Berger (2004) and Green (2023) argue, the metaphor of the chrysalis symbolizes a liminal stage of transformation, when one is neither their old self nor yet their new self. While this metaphor emphasizes the necessity of transition, it also implies the ability to withdraw from the world and have time to process change, a scenario that is often unrealistic. In this case, the image of butterfly’s mirrors Ketty’s internal journey towards her self-discovery. Her reaction to the butterflies, which “I just...” I begin, then I stop and shake my head,” emphasizes her emotional conflict where the unconscious is offering her a piece of truth, but her ego is not ready to perceive it. This highlights how amnesia is not merely a loss but also a space where unconscious desires and forgotten truths attempt to resurface through symbolic forms.

The butterflies reappearing several times in the narration further affirm it as an interesting concept for readers to interpret as a symbolic element. It reappears again on two pages: “The roses. The butterflies. I get up, but my head is swirling with memories and feelings like there’s a whirlwind trapped inside it” (p. 33), and “And there are the butterflies again, darting and dancing in the soft summer breeze” (p. 39). This memory recall of butterflies is closely linked to the repressed trauma from the accident that caused her amnesia. As shown in the subsequent narration on page 39, she begins to recount the full memory of what happened, indicating a shift in her cognitive and emotional processing. Engelhard et al (2019) emphasize that traumatic memories are not fixed; rather each act of recollection can reconfigure the emotional and narrative dimensions of the memory process known as reconsolidation, which enables trauma to be subtly rewritten over time. From a trauma-processing perspective, research on Eye Movement Desentization and Reprocessing (EMDR) suggests that traumatic memories are often stored in fragmented sensory and emotional forms, which can be reactivate by perceptual cues and gradually integrated into adaptive memory networks (Ricci et al., 2009). With that, the repeated appearance of butterflies can be interpreted as a sensory emotional trigger that facilitates the gradual retrieval and reorganization of the protagonist’s traumatic memory. Furthermore, according to Brison (2002), survivors can regain control over their own stories by re-narrating trauma using symbolic elements, which unify previously unreachable feelings and disjointed memories into a cohesive sense of self.

Other data from the book show that Ketty's unconscious mind has made several attempts to reveal the truth to her. "Jasmine – that's a nice name, I think as I pick at the skin around my nail" (p. 31) indicates that she remembers something vividly. The name of a girl appeared familiar. However, she could not recall whose name belonged to. Her act of picking the nail shows a sign of anxiety. According to Tan et al (2024), nail picking and biting may occasionally appear as a coping mechanism. In other instances, these common behaviors may be difficult to control and are done habitually in response to anxiety disorders. Without Ketty realizing it, her body shows signs of anxiety, possibly due to the unknown truth that might hurt her.

The recurrent images of butterflies represent Ketty's internal conflict and metamorphosis as she works through amnesia. Her memory loss, according to Jung's idea, creates room for her unconscious self to surface and direct her personal development. Her repressed memories are triggered by the butterflies, and her buried anxiousness is exposed by actions like nail picking. These components demonstrate the fluidity of trauma and memory, facilitating identity integration and healing throughout time. The way that Ketty's intricate journey of self-discovery and emotional healing is reflected in symbolic cues and physical reactions is highlighted in this chapter.

CONCLUSION

The way that amnesia serves as a psychological metaphor and a narrative technique for Ketty's individuation journey in *The Mystery of Me* has been examined in this study. We have demonstrated that memory loss actively reshapes identity rather than erasing it by looking at three interconnected dimensions, such as the unconscious rejection of her former self, the appearance of symbolic fragments as relics of infantile memory, and amnesia as a domain for unconscious desire to occur. First, Ketty's initial resistance to recalling her former behaviors reflects a defense mechanism that protects her ego from painful self-recognition. Second, her encounter with affectively charged fragments, which are Otis's invitation and the recurring butterflies, demonstrates how the unconscious uses symbolic cues to reconstruct a sense of self when explicit memory is unavailable. Finally, the blank slate of amnesia invites the unconscious to guide Ketty toward new values and connections, enabling her to make moral and relational choices unbound by past reputations.

When taken as a whole, these results show how memory, symbolism, and identity interact dynamically. Repressed truths begin to surface, emotional healing takes place, and a more cohesive self-starts to emerge, showing that amnesia is not merely a state of absence. The emptiness of memory serves as the essential motivation for change in Ketty's story, serving as a potent reminder that our identity is constantly being rewritten by the things we remember and the things we decide to become.

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