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Stages of Formation in Jonathan Lethem’s *Motherless Brooklyn*

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**Introduction**

*Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), the story of Lionel Essrog, Tourettic orphan who turns loner detective, is often considered Jonathan Lethem’s breakthrough novel. It won the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Macallan Gold Dagger, the Salon Book Award, and was hailed as novel of the year by Esquire. Following the science fiction/coming-of-age tale of *Girl in Landscape* (1998), it can be seen as the first step in the author’s literary reconnection with his boyhood in Brooklyn upon his physical return there in 1996, after twelve years in California. Lethem has described the novel partly as “a conscious effort to set the ground for writing a bigger and more serious book about Brooklyn” (Schiff 127), referring to his next novel, *Fortress of Solitude* (2003), which deals even more autobiographically with Brooklyn, isolation and motherlessness (Lethem’s mother died when he was 13).

Although having worked in what many would consider recognizable genres like science fiction, Lethem has voiced a distrust of the limitations of genres. He has claimed that “mystery novels or science fiction novels” that “fulfil [their genres] completely” are at best “sweetly pathetic confessions of adolescent longings” on the part of the author (Silverblatt 26). In another interview, Lethem has stated that “[a]ll of my stories tend to be, at one level, interrogations of the genre they inhabit” (Kelleghan 227). True to his dictum, Lethem is famed for challenging genres, often letting one clash with another. His 1994 novel *Gun, with Occasional Music* puts a hard-boiled1 narrative in a dystopian sci-fi setting; *Girl in Landscape* (1998), as mentioned, is a coming-of-age story set in a futuristic

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1 The term ‘hard-boiled’ denotes a stark and realistic style often associated with urban detective fiction of the 1920s onwards (Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, et al.), which later evolved into a crime fiction genre of its own.
landscape; while *Motherless Brooklyn* superimposes a coming-of-age tale on a hard-boiled foundation, closing this genre-mixing circle.

In reviews and critical analyses of *Motherless Brooklyn*, much attention has been directed at Lionel’s Tourettic condition, expressed by involuntary gestures (ticcing), echolalia, and ecstatic word-mangling. In his 2012 monograph, James Peacock points out that with the waning influence of psychoanalysis and the simultaneous rise of neuropsychiatric diagnoses in Western societies, disorders of the latter kind have been increasingly featured in popular literature of the 2000s (*Jonathan Lethem* 100). Peacock mentions, for instance, Mark Haddon’s 2003 novel *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night* (2003) and Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005) (*Jonathan Lethem* 114). Examining *Motherless Brooklyn* and other works, critic Jennifer L. Fleissner concludes that literary characters with obsessive compulsion disorders (OCD) have been granted a “center stage” after having been employed earlier “primarily for comic relief” (“Modernity” 107). She argues that these novels offer an “alternative view of OCD” where the symptoms are construed as integral to the characters’ personalities as well as to “the vagaries of modern life itself” (131). Speaking specifically of *Motherless Brooklyn* in a later article, Fleissner finds that Lionel's Tourettic ticcing “momentarily exposes an underlying freakishness organizing the social whole” (“Symptomatology” 391).

Bennett Kravitz, like Peacock, draws on Susan Sontag in his reading of the novel to examine the cultural connotations of contemporary disorders and maladies. He develops the idea of a “symbiotic relationship” (174) between Lionel’s condition and that of New York City. Tourette’s, in Kravitz’s reading, becomes both a symptom of and a means to tackle an increasingly postmodern, fragmented world. Kravitz views Lionel as a success in this respect, at the end of
his analysis celebrating him as a fully accomplished detective who overcomes his handicap, employing Tourette’s to solve the case (175). Kravitz, however, neglects providing any textual proof of this last conjecture.

Caroline Chamberlin Hellman argues that Lionel’s orphaned condition and existential anxiety lead to the creation of multiple selves, and finds this predicament to have a clear parallel in the borough of Brooklyn “puzzling its own heritage and identity” (81). She goes on to compare Lionel with Walt Whitman’s poet-persona. In her reading, both are conceived of as children of the “borough itself” (81), less individuals in their own right than containers of “multitudes” (83). The literary function of Lionel’s freeform verbal outbursts is compared to that of Whitman’s all-embracing free verse, both being unconventional lyrical methods of “comprehending, explicating, and gaining control over the exterior environment” (Chamberlin Hellman 83).

Without pulling Whitman into his reading, James Peacock deals with similar aspects of Lionel’s coming to terms with existential issues. He does so by focusing more on the generic frames of the novel. Firstly, he points out that Lethem’s constant subverting of traditional genres in his works is an examination of the ethics of “evolution itself” (“Genre Evolutions” 425). Partly confirming Lethem’s proclaimed literary goal referred to earlier, Peacock views these “genre evolutions” as “designed to destabilize the cosy categories with which we orient ourselves” (440). Generic boundaries, he claims, help to create a “shared cognitive map for protagonist and reader” (439), i.e. a template for human behaviour and cognition. By breaking them up, as in the case of Motherless Brooklyn, Peacock argues that Lethem leaves both reader and Lionel at a loss for “means of orienting oneself in geographical, ethical and literary space” (427). At the textual level,
Peacock finds “the vicissitudes of experience”—the randomness of life itself—to be what constantly disrupt the emotional and ethical assurance provided by these cognitive maps (430). In a later analysis, he elaborates further on the concept, arguing that Lionel’s Tourettic ticcing could in itself be viewed as a cognitive map that keeps him trapped in emotions of guilt and nostalgia, impeding his mourning process (Jonathan Lethem 109-110).

In the most recent monograph on Lethem’s works, Matthew Luter devotes a chapter to a comprehensive analysis of Motherless Brooklyn, emphasizing the self-reflective aspects of the novel as detective fiction in the vein of Raymond Chandler, calling it “purely joyful quasi-fan fiction” (29). Referring to Peacock’s analysis, he finds protagonist Lionel to be less tied down by nostalgia (46). Luter argues that emotion-setting stock elements and stereotypes are not at the core of the novel’s exploitation of the hard-boiled genre, but rather language per se, in the form of punning wisecracks and street metaphors employed by the characters (30). Luter also picks up on the novel’s exploration of the identity crisis of New York, particularly the increasingly gentrified Brooklyn’s “inferiority complex” vis-à-vis Manhattan (42), emotions that Luter finds the main characters to have internalized.

Obviously, the above critics share a general unconcern with the novel’s detective plot, seeing it, in Luter’s words, as “not necessarily the point of the book” (30). Fleissner, Peacock, Hellman, and Kravitz all view what Peacock terms the “linguistic joys” of Tourette’s (Jonathan Lethem 96), and/or its metaphorical implications as clearly more important in their respective readings. Add to this the various takes on the novel’s genre destabilizing aspects and meditation on Brooklyn’s identity struggle, and these points fairly well sum up the critique that the novel has generated so far. Although Lethem in an interview has referred to the
novel as “a Bildungsroman, a family romance, a coming-of-age story” (Jackson 35), this perspective has gained considerably less attention. Peacock, for instance, sees the coming-of-age story as a “residual” to the detective story (Jonathan Lethem 99).

To provisionally place *Motherless Brooklyn* in the vast field of detective fiction, one can use Chu-Chueh Cheng’s concept of the detective’s story, which differs from the more traditional detective story by highlighting “epistemological and ontological issues” (371) rather than celebrating the “sagacity and competence” of the detective/protagonist (381). Works in the former category, Cheng argues, appeal to the readers’ pathos, while the latter appeals to their logic (374). The focus of detective’s stories is to probe the protagonist’s psychological character and, as is most often the case, fallacies. Lionel, the protagonist-narrator of *Motherless Brooklyn*, constantly refers to his past, his emotional life, his obsessions, and existential doubts during his quest to reveal the identity of the murderer. Coming to terms with his own swaying identity is arguably his main concern throughout *Motherless Brooklyn*, which could thus safely be put in Cheng’s category of detective’s stories.

This thesis will draw on the link between the Bildungsroman and detective fiction that Ilsu Sohn identifies in an article on Wilkie Collins’s 1868 novel *The Moonstone*. Sohn points out that in this novel, “[t]he narrative momentum to complete [the protagonist’s] socialization simultaneously drives the detective work forward” (150). In other words, the detective’s aim to attain closure of the plot parallels the coming-of-age protagonist’s journey towards a coherent identity. The same developments, this thesis will argue, are at work in *Motherless Brooklyn*. Although the societal setting is obviously very different from the
Victorian middle-class Britain of *The Moonstone*, Lionel is imbued with a corresponding drive to reinstate order in a rapidly changing environment. In terms of style and setting, *Motherless Brooklyn* is clearly related to the classic hard-boiled tradition of American detective fiction of the 20th century. But it also differs from works in this sub-genre, particularly in two respects: Lionel is not fully recognized as a detective—not even by himself, as will become clear—and the disrupted order that he engages with, this thesis suggests, primarily pertains to himself and his immediate surroundings. In fact, his is less a mission to disclose societal or institutional corruption than to figure out his own place in Brooklyn’s demimonde where “[a]ll was talk except for what mattered the most, which were unspoken understandings” (Lethem 55). In *Motherless Brooklyn*, in other words, the plotlines of detection and coming-of-age seem to converge towards the same point: Lionel himself.

Sohn further argues that literary detectives with features of “uprootedness... perpetual mobility and liminality, the unorthodox and socially intimidating power of reasoning, and no settlement or generational continuity” are perfectly suited for detective work (153). Following this logic, the most apt detectives are also the ones most strongly defined by a lack of the assumptions of the Bildungsroman, that is of harmonious social integration. Obviously, Sohn’s list of two-edged features aligns well with the characteristics of neurotic, drug-addicted, bereaved, and/or lonesome private investigators in the vein of Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes or Chandler’s Philip Marlowe. As will be shown, they also apply to the protagonist of *Motherless Brooklyn* who, on the other hand, is far less conclusively defined as compared to the archetypal private eyes. Being also younger and emotionally unsettled, Lionel’s character clearly invites a coming-of-age reading.
The term ‘coming-of-age story’ will henceforth be employed more frequently than ‘Bildungsroman’, mainly because, as Stella Bolaki writes, the former is less “burdened with the cultural baggage of the Bildungsroman” (20). Though Bolaki herself has contributed greatly to the “unsettling” of the genre, *Motherless Brooklyn*, with its incongruous Tourettic hero, does not easily lend itself to a further expansion of this already “notoriously slippery category“ (10). Neither does the novel conform smoothly to Marianne Hirsch’s attempt at defining ‘the novel of formation’, which presupposes, for instance, the featuring of society as the novel’s antagonist whose values clash with those of the protagonist (297)—greater societal values are not much highlighted in the novel. Moreover, Lionel could hardly be described as a “representative individual ... within the context of a defined social order”, as the first point in Hirsch’s model has it (296). Lionel is, simply put, not representative enough for any recognizable strata or group in American society. His two most prominent features—his Tourette’s and orphandom—obstructs the potential for an allegorical, paradigmatic, or metaphorical reading of him. As Peacock, as well as this thesis, argues, the dialectic between representativeness and uniqueness lies, in fact, at the core of the novel (*Jonathan Lethem* 97-98).

Despite its restricted conformity to the ideals of the Bildungsroman or Hirsch’s novel of formation, *Motherless Brooklyn* must be said to have the formation of selfhood as its strongest theme—quite often it obscures the detective plot. To be sure, several features of the Bildungsroman and Hirsch’s defining characteristics are identifiable in the novel. For example, many characters with a certain function in the detective plot have a concomitant function that could be categorized using Hirsch’s terms, like the Educator, the Companion, and the Lover.
(298). But in order to sidestep the question of conformity and instead highlight its
generic intermediacy, a simple but sufficiently workable description of the novel
could be: a coming-of-age narrative upheld by a detective plot.

Lionel’s formation of self will be outlined as a succession of
developmental stages, a term borrowed from psychosocial development theory
pioneered by Erik Erikson in the 1950s and 60s. Anniken Telnes Iversen has noted
how psychologist Jane Kroger, in her 2004 study Identity in Adolescence: The
Balance between Self and Other, contrasts Erikson’s non-linear model to the
linear, quantitative models of identity formation which divides personalities into
basic, given types (Iversen 72)—a model which, perhaps, would better apply to
archetypal, unchanging, literary detectives of Cheng’s category of detective fiction.
Erikson’s model, by contrast, views identity formation as “a series of different
stages, each one different from, yet building on, the previous one” (72). More
specifically, this thesis will employ concepts from James Marcia’s ‘Identity Status
Paradigm’ as outlined by Iversen. The model is an in-depth elaboration of the
conflicts at work in the adolescent stage in Erikson’s model. Iversen describes
Marcia’s four ‘identity statuses’ which a person may vacillate between on his or
her development towards young adulthood (73). Three of them, this thesis will
argue, can be used to identify the stages of Lionel’s development: Foreclosure,
moratorium, and identity achievement (they will be referenced and explained as
they appear in the analysis). This model suits Lionel’s development well. Firstly,
as the narrative seems to concern a prolonged, crisis-ridden adolescence which is,
moreover, not presented in an entirely linear fashion—recollections and
reassessments play important parts in his development. Secondly, Marcia’s model
emphasizes the dialectic between the factors of exploration and commitment (75),
which has the advantage of acknowledging an active, performative element on the part of the subject. It is thus, thirdly, a view of identity formation more in line with a postmodern paradigm in which the novel arguably is set.

This thesis, then, will argue that *Motherless Brooklyn* could be read as a postmodern, genre-subverting coming-of-age novel that takes protagonist Lionel Essrog through a series of developmental stages. The first one provides him with language and a sense of belonging but confines him to the realm of his primary mentor and boss, Frank Minna. After the first crisis of identity, initialized by Frank’s death, Lionel explores a well-known literary landscape of generic codes of hard-boiled fiction that, however, leaves him stranded with a makeshift identity in an intertextual limbo, pointing towards a second crisis. In the simultaneous search for his boss’s killer, Lionel is propelled towards the final stage, in which he is liberated both from the plot and its generic conventions, committing himself to a new career. In this discussion, extensive use will be made of Peacock’s aforementioned concept of genre as a cognitive map, as well as Marcia’s developmental stages.

**First Stage: Apprenticeship and Foreclosure**

In a flashback to Lionel’s adolescence, the novel’s setting, a pre-gentrified Brooklyn neighbourhood of the 1980s and early 1990s, is described as “Nowhere, a place strenuously ignored in passing through to Somewhere Else” (Lethem 37). This is where Lionel’s initial formation takes place, and it is, indeed, most significantly shaped by lack. First and foremost he is deprived of parentage and thereby a connection to the world beyond the confines of the orphanage and school, a world presumably replete with “women ... letters ... phone calls ...
forests” (37). Likewise lacking in his life are meaningful inter-personal relationships and intimacies, apart from moments such as the awkward masturbation try-out with fellow orphan Gilbert, which only manages to create a “ghostly bond” between them (42). Lionel’s adolescence is devoid of educators, to use Hirsch’s term, i.e. adults or peers with mentor-like capacities. He is further estranged from people around him by his Tourettic condition which nobody is able or willing to diagnose. In short, Lionel is considered crazy, a “walking joke, preposterous, improbable, unseeable” (83), someone who is, at best, tolerated, but more often actively ignored. Whereas his other yet-to-be companions, Tony and Danny, at least have a sense of ethnic ancestry thanks to their names and looks, and thereby a sense of potential, future belonging, Lionel is not even aware of the Jewish roots that his surname, Essrog, is hinting at—a state of motherlessness emphasized by the fact that the Jewish connection is kept unstated throughout the novel2. In this solitary, suspended existence, Lionel turns to books and television in a search for role-models, discovering in Charlie Chaplin’s and Buster Keaton’s frantic but, importantly, silent screen characters a reflection of his own Tourette-laden, stemmed-up urge to engage with his surroundings.

Still in their early teens, Lionel, Tony, Gilbert, and Danny are unexpectedly bundled together into a team by Frank Minna, a small-time Brooklyn racketeer who employs them as movers of, as it turns out, stolen goods. Through him, the orphan boys are delivered overnight from being in a guideless state of bleak prospects and into that bigger world which they all have been tacitly longing for. Frank enters their lives in a totalizing manner, claiming his space much like a returning lost parent, though without the pity or guilt that might have come with

2 The Jewish connection has been confirmed as intentional by Lethem in an interview with Michael Silverblatt (26).
such a reunion. Through his ambiguous joint role as idealized surrogate father, mentor, and employer, he offers Lionel just what he has been deprived of up to then: a sense of connection. Frank gives the boys new haircuts and drivers licenses, and grants them a function outside an indifferent school system. His preferred language style—wisecracks, insults, and shticks—seems, moreover, closely related to Lionel’s likewise brutal verbal eruptions. In Frank’s presence, Lionel’s Tourettic utterances are, as it were, sublimated, transcending pure craziness into something at least closer to meaningfulness. Frank picks up his most expressive puns for later reuse, further enhancing their hypothetical father-and-son relationship.

Wisecrack dialogue with its stark and punning metaphors became, as Scott D. Yarbrough points out, a staple of hard-boiled fiction after Hammett (“Literary Aspects” 1922). Ralph Willet defines it as “a stylized demonstration of knowledge which expresses an irreverence towards authority and institutional power”, adding that “[w]isecracks put to use as weapons are an assertion of autonomy, a defiant refusal to be browbeaten” (qtd. in Norman 213). This succinctly sums up Frank’s hard-nosed character and the moral he imparts to his Minna Men. Frank’s recurring wisecrack advice to them goes “Tell your story walking” (Lethem 69), meaning: Talk your talk, be funny, but never brood over past or future, just keep moving ahead. “He loved talk but despised explanations” (69), as Lionel attests. This might exemplify Frank’s ambiguous hold on his subjects: demanding self-expression and cleverness but denying them any secure, stable position from which a more profound self-reflection would become possible. Yet, the context he gives them, along with the presumption that the well-connected Frank—their “exact reverse” (38)—holds the power to reveal the
hidden ‘structures of meaning’ and ‘master plots’ that govern not only the underworld but also the boys’ own lives keep them magnetically tied to him.

Fifteen years on, pushing thirty, the orphan boys have become “Minna Men to the bone” (7): the muscles, eyes and ears of Frank’s private investigation agency (hidden behind a taxi service front), their harrowing frames now “oversize, undereducated, vibrant with hostility” (35). They are still, however, four orphans under Frank Minna’s thumb: denied free agency, neither trusted to handle guns nor their own money. Lionel is even living at the second floor of their office. They remain unaware as to who their clients really are and the exact nature of the agency’s business, with Frank sneering “wheels within wheels” to halt speculations (74). Lionel compares the Minna Men to “Monopoly pieces ... moved around the game board” (3), evoking the image of a confined comfort zone beyond which Manhattan, for example, manifests itself as a “big world of conspiracies and doormen” (208). It is of symbolic importance that Lethem sets the first chapter’s stakeout scene, in which Lionel loses Frank to his kidnapper/murderer, and the final scene of denouement to, respectively, Manhattan’s Upper East Side and a coastal village in Maine. It is in locations like these, way off Lionel’s “customary map” (3), that the big turning points in the story take place.

The first stage of Lionel’s formation is thus strongly suggestive of Marcia’s concept of foreclosure, a status of commitment resulting from “a strong identification with older people who are in a position of authority” (Iversen 76). It often entails internalizing the values and following the careers of these authority figures, while the relationships tend to “lack psychological depth” (76). This seems a fit description of Lionel’s relation to his idealized but elusive boss and mentor. In their seemingly endless state of apprenticeship, Lionel and the Minna Men are kept
in dependence and ignorance, denied further exploration or development of their identities. The vulnerability of their Icarian ascent into Frank’s world is evident in scenes such as when Lionel, shocked by having been (temporarily) abandoned by Frank after a rowdy argument, imagines how the Minna Men’s “inadequate wings [were] melting in the sun” (79).

**Second Stage: Moratorium and Hard-boiled as a Cognitive Map**

The scene in the novel’s first chapter in which Lionel and Gilbert find their boss fatally wounded in a dumpster carries a striking symbolism of reversion that sets the stage for the story that follows: Frank, the imaginary father, is carried from the womb of the dumpster to his death in the hospital by his imaginary sons, the cable of his wire transmitter left on the ground like a discarded umbilical cord. The end of Frank clearly marks a turning point as Lionel is again orphaned, only now he is an adult orphan, having suddenly to act on his own accord to explore his new status. The novel begins, in other words, with an end that results in a new phase of Lionel’s developmental journey.

In Marcia’s model, this status, called *moratorium*, entails an identity crisis in which “family relations are marked by ambivalence” (Iversen 76). For Lionel, this phase begins with a plunge into alienation, where familiar turns unfamiliar. As chaos ensues in Frank’s absence, the other Men become enigmas to Lionel. Meeting Danny in the agency’s office, Lionel has a feeling of having regressed in time: “Now, without Minna for a conduit between us, Danny and I had to begin again grasping one another as entities, as though we were suddenly fourteen years old again and occupying our opposite niches at St. Vincent’s Home for Boys” (Lethem 125). Soon enough, Lionel realizes that there is nothing to hold the team
together any longer; true brotherhood was, in fact, never there, and he is on his own, doubly forsaken in the world, and devoid of direction.

This is where genre, as relating to literature, steps in, manifesting itself as a cognitive map to Lionel, offering him a way to decode the new circumstances. As Peacock reminds us, genre can function as "a means of orienting oneself in geographical, ethical and literary space" (“Genre Evolutions” 427). Having been endowed, at least by Frank, with the professional status of ‘detective’, impregnated by the tropes of detective fiction and its wisecrack language, and left with a dead body whose unknown murderer is at large in a chaotic urban world, the full-scale hard-boiled generic setting could hardly be much closer at hand. In fact, already in the first line of the novel Lionel’s narrator-voice asserts that “[c]ontext is everything” (Lethem 1), thus planting the important theme of how setting (both real and fictional) influences formation of identity.

So Lionel transforms into an amalgam of his own father figure and the figure of the parentless loner detective who, as Alexandru Budac describes the prototype, “roams the hostile streets using his fists, delivering a leering and cynical rhetoric, and epitomizing a rough appropriation of Emerson’s ‘self-reliance’” (124). Lionel imagines himself taking on the characteristics of his former boss: “[C]ollar up against the cold like Minna, unshaven like Minna now, too ... That’s who I was supposed to be, that black outline of a man in a coat, ready suspicious eyes above his collar, shoulders hunched, moving toward conflict” (Lethem 226). One motivational hurdle remains, however, which could be seen as a remnant from the previous stage of foreclosure, with the subject heavily reliant on a figure of authority. Without a boss, a client, or even trusted colleagues to take cues from anymore, Lionel imagines himself and the Minna Men as “an arrangement around
a missing centrepiece, as incoherent as a verbless sentence” (91). To become the
truly self-reliant, performative detective, Lionel still needs that decisive push to
step into his master’s shoes and to pursue a shadowy case that nobody else is
asking him to pursue. To this end, self-imposed guilt for Frank’s death in tandem
with the ostensible promise of the generic detective quest, i.e. narrative closure,
seems to provide sufficient motivation.

Third Stage: Temporary Identity Achievement

At this point in the novel, Lionel has seemingly emerged at the fourth and highest
stage of Marcia’s model, self-explanatorily called identity achievement (Iversen
76). This is where people have committed themselves to a goal, “started working
in their chosen field”, and “appear calm and settled, at ease with what and who
they are” (76-77). Lionel’s uncertainty and grief are allayed by his entrenching
himself in the quest. He is, indeed, for a while at ease among the narrative codes in
the hard-boiled universe which Budac has described as imbued by “[t]he almost
gnostic vision of a fallen world and the improbable promise that there is light
hidden in darkness” (123). After a brief, solitary sandwich-and-whiskey ritual in
his room on the eve of Frank’s murder, Lionel wakes up the next morning with
strange, “revelatory” feelings of “sheer joy, rather than helplessness”, viewing
himself as Frank’s “successor and avenger”, sensing that the city is “[shining] with
clues” (Lethem 132). Hoping to leave Cheng’s notion of the detective’s story
behind, so to speak, he elevates the aspects of the classical detective story (clues,
quest, deduction, etc.), aspiring towards the “analytical apparatus” rather than the
“confessing soul” who lets the past mingle with the present and risks losing the
case in the process (Cheng 387).
Lionel’s commitment to the role of the hard-boiled, single-minded apparatus-detective can, furthermore, be viewed as an attempt to rid himself of his unique orphan-self who constantly seems to be demanding its place at “the center of the storyline” where Cheng finds the less fortunate literary detectives (387). In this light, Lionel employs the well-known literary quest narrative, casting himself as a “detective on a case” (Lethem 132), and starts looking for Frank’s murderer as a means for transcendence, i.e. to become a better, adult version of himself, free of self-doubt. With the prospect of doing good detective work, as compared to the shady errands Frank assigned the Minna Men, Lionel might even hope to fulfill a long overdue identity-shaping goal: “I ached always to be a virtuous detective” (296).

As soon becomes clear, this stage of Lionel’s coming-of-age is set in a half-fictional, makeshift space where his detective persona is, as Luter has it, “not fully real, not fully make-believe” (36). For all the generic integrity it aspires to, it cannot exorcize the orphan’s doubts altogether. In fact, the earlier quote from Lionel, in full, tellingly goes: “It seemed possible I was a detective on a case” (132, my emphasis).

Fourth Stage: Role-playing and Doubt in the Generic Landscape

The instability of the generic landscape that Lionel manoeuvres in and the fact that playing the role of the detective is contingent on make-believe can be perceived in the scene in which Tony interrogates Lionel at gunpoint about his plans, trying to make him drop the case. Lionel proposes that “[w]hen someone kills your partner you’re supposed to do something about it” (Lethem 183). As a sarcastic understatement it is wisecracking at its utmost—Luter has even noted that the line
is a near-quote from Dashiell Hammett’s seminal 1938 hard-boiled novel *The Maltese Falcon* (38). Moreover, its moral rationale conforms perfectly to the generic map Lionel tries to stick to, with its fundamental imperative of taking action, independently, in order to reach closure. But context is, indeed, everything, and in the context of the latent instability of Lionel’s self, the sarcasm is undermined by the doubt inherent in ‘supposed to’, betraying the statement as a fully grounded conviction. With no further corroboration of its legitimacy, the proposal rather resembles a tentative extrapolation of a typical hard-boiled detective’s typical code of conduct. Lionel is, in other words, referring to the detective-persona rather than embodying it.

In fact, Lionel is but one of several characters who show the same ambivalence towards, or outright dismissal of, an imposed hard-boiled identity by using this phrase—indicative of how generic doubt pervades the whole novel. In one scene, Lionel is apprehended by a gang of Zen practitioners sent by their master to act as hoodlums, price-tags still dangling from their sunglasses. Pathetically, they struggle to convince not only Lionel but also themselves of their role-playing, stating: “We’re supposed to throw a scare into you” (146). In another scene, Frank’s estranged wife/widow, Julia, laughs at Lionel’s request for her to stay with the Minna Men to become their new figurehead, recognizing and dismissing the generic formula that seems prescribed for her: “I’m supposed to be the widow in black ... That’s what Frank kept me around for, my big moment. No thanks” (102).

By comparison, Tony does not show any such ambivalence towards the hard-boiled genre. He is following its road map determinedly, having already made plans to take over the business in the wake of their boss’s death. To Lionel’s
earlier mentioned suggestion, he retorts like a realist to a self-delusory romantic: “Minna wasn’t your partner. He was your sponsor, Freakshow” (Lethem 183). Later in the novel, when Tony over the phone threatens to kill him, Lionel replies with an almost tender wisecrack: “You had your chance” (248), and then tries to pacify him by alluding to their common history. Commenting on this dialogue in his narrator-voice, Lionel confirms his romantic longing for contextual familiarity with a hard-boiled reference that seems to be intended as a consolatory narrative in the midst of pending fratricide: “Tony still brought out the romantic in me. We’d be two Bogarts to the end” (248). This is hard-boiled wisecracking referencing of the hard-boiled universe itself, and as such symptomatic of Lionel’s being caught in a generic feedback loop where anxiety and ambivalence grow stronger by each turn. Apparently, soon after his temporary identity achievement, his status is back at the exploratory level of moratorium. This time, however, the full-on crisis is kept at bay by keeping the role-playing going in waiting for the plot’s closure.

As proposed by Luter et al., Motherless Brooklyn can be read as detective fiction about detective fiction (27). This is perhaps most evident in the way Lethem plays with the postmodern concept of intertextuality, presenting several of the novel’s characters—most notably Lionel, Frank, and Julia—as consumers of real-world fiction, having them allude to such works directly or by implication. On several occasions Frank refers to movies, urging the boys, without irony, to go and see The Conversation to “learn a thing or two about surveillance” (87), while Lionel, as has been mentioned, makes numerous references to hard-boiled fiction by the likes of Chandler and Hammett, both in his narrator-voice and in his spoken lines.
To a large extent, Lionel’s doubts about his place in the generic landscape are due to a delicate awareness of the instability of its codes, a sensibility he receives, as so much else, via Frank’s mentorship. Frank, though himself a keen circulator of tropes from detective fiction, can also pounce on what he deems to be too obvious, outdated, or out-of-place references, as when Gilbert annoys him by calling a gun “a piece” (Lethem 8). Frank, in other words, decides where the line is drawn between real and cliché in their intertextual universe. Thus Lionel’s language—and by extension, a big part of his identity—is shaped by a blend of texts, with Frank as the commonest denominator: partly Brooklyn street slang handed down by Frank, and partly detective fiction language gathered from books and movies but sieved through Frank’s arbitration, creating a latent linguistic anxiety which only heightens after Frank is gone.

A case in point is the scene where Lionel is at Julia’s home to break the news of Frank’s death. Julia lets her cigarette lie burning on a dresser. Tense for several reasons, Lionel urges her to pick it up, to which she replies “Let it burn”. In his confused state, Lionel cannot decode the utterance as literal or figurative, real or cliché. To assuage the anxiety of the situation, condensed into the shape of the burning cigarette, he makes a feeble attempt to find a cognitive common ground by forcing the ambiguous statement into the relatively stable realm of fiction by asking “Is that a quote from a movie? ‘Let it burn’? I feel like I remember that from some movie” (102). When Tony later condescendingly describes Lionel with the words “Everything you know comes from Frank Minna or a book”, Lionel admits to this, adding “or gangster movies” (184). Lionel’s postmodern hyper-sensibility is so palpable it often seems to verge on a full-on realization of himself as a fictional subject.
His intertextual awareness makes it even harder for Lionel to fulfil the hard-boiled stereotype, i.e. to be as opposed to try to act as—a thematically important discrepancy in the novel. With his Tourettic outbursts no longer consecrated by Frank, they yet again become but a handicap, inducing self-awareness and leaving him deprived of what ought to be his prime weapon: his language. This impediment constantly undermines his aspiration to join the ranks of the detectives of the Chandlerian tradition, these being “laconic, understated, and unflappable wisecrackers” (Yarbrough, “Detectives” 2153). Directly following on Lionel’s earlier quoted description of the unshaven, collared, ideal detective who he was ‘supposed to be’ comes the acknowledgement of his shortcomings in the real world. In this statement Lionel makes reference to a younger, immature, indistinct self that he cannot seem to shake: “Here’s who I was instead: that same coloring-book outline of a man, but crayoned by the hand of a mad or carefree or retarded child, wild slashes of idiot color, a blizzard of marks violating the boundaries that made man distinct from street, from world” (Lethem 226). In other words, the boundaries of the generic map, Lionel’s provisional ideal world, cannot hold the attacks from his own unique and unresolved orphan-self.

The hard-boiled detective in the vein of Philip Marlowe is a “complex mix of positive and negative attributes” (Rollyson, “Thrillers” 2114). His repeated solitary encounters with corruption give rise to a cynical outlook, turning him into a “disaffected loner”: the private eye archetype originating with Hammett’s Sam Spade (Rollyson, “Thrillers” 2113). As Lionel himself notes in one of his reflections on the genre he aims to inhabit: “[I]n detective stories things are always always, the detective casting his exhausted, caustic gaze over the corrupted permanence of everything and thrilling you with his sweetly savage
generalizations” (307). Nevertheless, the very same impairments contribute to making the detective ‘distinct from street and world’, capable of excavating hidden truths where others fail. Focusing on formative deficiencies of the detective figures of *The Moonstone*, Sohn finds proof that their "efficiency [as detectives] increases in proportion with [their] uprootedness, that is, [their] alienation from the classical coming of age" (156). At the end of *Motherless Brooklyn*, Lionel—in many ways a flawed detective—has, indeed, solved the case thanks to being alienated, solitary, and persistent—in short, by following Peacock’s generic map to the end.

But there is a tension constantly at work between this idealized, solitary, cynically calm detective persona and Lionel’s inner orphan-self who wants to ‘violate the boundaries’ of the former. This urge is most tangibly manifested in his Tourettic ticcing, so out-of-place in a detective’s trade, emphasizing a schizophrenic, self-and-other aspect of him, making him a double outsider. As Kravitz suggests: “Sometimes they are one, while at other times Tourette’s Syndrome is a separate entity that acts as Lionel’s adversary” (175). Lionel’s Tourettic self only helps him in becoming the persistent detective insofar as it abhors the confusion created by Frank’s death, by seeking “[a]ssertions and generalizations” (Lethem 307) in the ensuing chaos. But it also begins to itch when faced with too much order, and that itch, as Lionel explains, “is soon a torrent behind a straining dam” (1), spoiling the calm surface when it bursts. In other words, Lionel’s Tourettic self, the most concrete representation of his human uniqueness and fallibility, aims for recognition by constantly engaging with the world, whereas the successful detective must stay aloof and alienated, ‘distinct from street, from world’. The more Lionel tries to act the good, flawless detective, the more he must extend his distance from the real world, and thereby the distance
between his outer and inner selves, a route undoubtedly leading away from reconciliation between the two and a lasting identity achievement.

**Fifth Stage: Liberation from the Generic Map – True Identity Achievement**

The three most influential characters in the last phase of Lionel’s formation, in which his uniqueness breaks free of the generic bonds, are Julia, Kimmery, and, paradoxically, Frank.

Although Frank undeniably exploits Lionel and the Minna Men for his criminal activities, and in ways discussed above hampers Lionel’s formation of self, he gives Lionel a sense of belonging in the world—albeit a confined underworld. He also, importantly, recognizes Lionel’s uniqueness. This recognition supplies Lionel with the potential of finding a belonging in a bigger world, beyond his customary and generic maps, beyond the mean streets of Brooklyn. A case in point is the fact that Frank is the first to diagnose Lionel with Tourette’s, giving him a book on the disorder, and adding a stark yet tender truth: “Turns out you’re not the only freak in the show” (Lethem 81). Lionel is unique, the subtext asserts, though not alone in this uniqueness.

The function of Frank’s death has a similar complexity in the way it contains the seed for a development of Lionel’s self. As Frank is dying, Lionel begs him to disclose the identity of the murderer. Frank instead asks him to retell a joke they both know. As the joke turns out to hold a key to the culprit’s identity, in one interpretation Frank could be seen as using it to diabolically pull the reins on Lionel even after his death, knowing that Lionel’s Tourettic, order-craving self would be intent to get on to the quest to crack its hidden code. In another reading, however, as his final words do not contain an explicit command to find the killer,
it could be viewed as a way for Frank to prompt Lionel to choose, either to become, as it were, his own client, or to abandon a case that nobody is asking him to pursue. In this interpretation, Frank acknowledges Lionel’s free will, thereby releasing him from the authoritarian bonds that have kept him in the status of foreclosure. To take on the riddle and the quest is to challenge Frank’s tenet that secret codes and murderous conspiracies are but mental delusions, ‘wheels within wheels’.

As lacking in mentors as Lionel’s life is up to Frank’s entry, it is also devoid of non-inebriated intimacy with women: “I’d never before kissed a woman without having had a few drinks. And I’d never kissed a woman who hadn’t had a few herself” (220). Pervading the novel is a sense of a profound gap between the sexes, and thereby little potential of sentimental education, to use Hirsch’s term (298). The only two prominent female figures, Julia and Kimmery, are Zen practitioners, both with malfunctioning relationships to men in their pasts. The two women awaken a protective affection in Lionel, which is important to his formation in the way it seems to pull him out of the confines of his quest-focused persona.

Just like Lionel, Kimmery is experiencing emotional turmoil. Nevertheless, to Lionel she becomes the symbol of the calm, silent life that goes on outside of the bubble of the detective plot, a place without ubiquitous hidden, sinister patterns to expose, just the comforts of realizing one’s human connectedness. In the heat of their romantic meeting, Lionel notes how she, like him, has tics of her own (221)—they are both alike in their uniqueness, as Frank’s gift suggested earlier. This notion is deepened when Kimmery later vents her disbelief in Lionel’s obsessive detective-persona, commenting that she “thought
detectives were more, uh, subtle” (255). Behind the surface of his jokey response, Lionel actually attests to his uniqueness: “On TV they’re all the same. Real detectives are as unalike as fingerprints, or snowflakes” (255). Through her interest in him as a fallible human being and not a sleek stereotype, Kimmery forces Lionel to face his authenticity and question his generic representativeness, a development that is, by that time, already underway, acknowledged in Lionel’s constant wrestling with his detective-persona: “‘I want to find Frank’s killer.’ I’d already heard myself say this too many times, and meaning was leaking out of the phrase” (174). To refer to Peacock, Kimmery is an example of “the vicissitudes of experience” which have the power to disrupt generic boundaries to which “human life is not readily amenable” (“Genre Evolutions” 430).

Julia is arguably the character with the most profound effect on Lionel’s liberation from the generic map, and only partly for being the key to the unravelling of the quest. As the reader first meets her, she clearly alludes to the mysterious femme fatale, a stock character of detective fiction, defined by Victoria Kennedy as “manipulative, deceitful, murderous, and sometimes even psychotic” (30). Julia is described as “tall, plush, blond by nurture, defiant around the jaw” (Lethem 97), evoking the image of so many femme fatales of movie screens and book pages. As mentioned earlier, Lionel even tries to make sense of her actions by placing her in the cinematic domain (‘Is that a quote from a movie?’). Julia engages Lionel in a brief erotic interlude before she hastily escapes from New York, prompting a suspicion that she is somehow involved in Frank’s murder. But all implied notions of her are confuted as her reasons for evading the police turn out to be fully legitimate. With this turn, Lethem removes Julia from of a presumed femme fatale function and presents her instead as the “sulking
housewife” (98), her bitterness and cynicism a result of Frank’s failed attempt to model her after “a fading movie poster ... with panty hose and peroxide and sarcasm” (294). As the epitome of the failure of the fictional template and the sobering triumph of lived experience, she becomes, though she rejects his protective advances, Lionel’s platonic orphan sister: “I needed her to see that we were the same, disappointed lovers of Frank Minna, abandoned children” (297). They have both, it turns out, experienced the same prolonged stage of foreclosure and the identity crisis of the moratorium thanks to the same man. Looking back at the events at the end of the novel, she is the one character Lionel cannot “shrug off” (311), indicative of her importance to his final realizations.

In the cathartic final scene, standing with Julia by the Atlantic, Lionel rids himself of all detectives’ instruments gathered during his quest, thus symbolically shedding his generic persona. He flings Tony’s and Julia’s guns into the ocean along with Frank’s beeper and a cell phone, finally stripping himself of one shoe to satisfy his Tourettic compulsion. He emerges professionally self-castrated, symbolically new-born and, indeed, visibly unique in his only shoe: a one-shoed gumshoe³. It is at this point Lionel, for the second time in the story, uses the word ‘hard-boiled’, realizing then its deeper meaning, what lies beyond the genre it typically denotes. He or the Minna Men were never truly hard-boiled in comparison to Julia: “She was the hardest-boiled because she was the unhappiest” (303), he concludes.

“I’d imagined Frank and Tony were mine to protect, but I’d been wrong. I knew it now” (311), Lionel asserts in the epilogue. By letting go of his imagined guilt for the deaths of his master (Frank) and companion (Tony), along with his

³ Gumshoe is an early 20th century informal synonym for a detective. Gumshoes, i.e. sneakers, presumably allowed the detective to move around noiselessly.
make-shift identity, his status seems to have reached the stage of a more lasting *identity achievement*, a solid ground from where to tackle the next psychosocial challenge in Erikson’s model, pertaining to the conflict between isolation and intimacy (Iversen 77). Though happiness is not a quality that he assigns to himself, his social integration seems at least more harmonious and less marked by secrecy than from where he started off. The taxi agency service which was only a front for racketeering during the days of Frank is up and running, while the detective agency is so clean it does not have any clients. This return to the starting-point after a self-formative experience contributes to evoking the idea of the classic Bildungsroman as François Jost describes it, namely as “a kind of pre-novel, or ‘préambule’, because it only recounts the start of a person’s life until he is ‘armed for existence, ready to live his novel’” (qtd. in Iversen 25). At the age of 28, Lionel’s prolonged adolescence, his ‘préambule’, has finally reached its end, and he is armed for adult life in a socially overt position.

**Conclusion**

This thesis has argued that *Motherless Brooklyn*, a detective’s story in Chu-Chue Cheng’s terminology, can be read as Lionel Essrog’s journey through five stages of James Marcia’s Identity Status Paradigm model. Lionel’s identity is initially shaped in solitude, in significant lack of mentors and companions. Through Frank Minna, Lionel is allowed to enter a bigger world in which his Tourettic uniqueness is acknowledged and made use of. The totalitarian stance of his surrogate father, however, keeps him trapped in *foreclosure*, ignorant, dependant and suspended in a confined space in which a further development of self is obstructed.
With Frank’s death, Lionel experiences a crisis of identity, entering the alienating status of *moratorium*. Deciding to endorse the persona of the self-reliant loner detective using the hard-boiled universe as a generic map to decode his new context, he appears to overcome his crisis and reach the status of *identity achievement*. During this short-lived phase, the self-imposed quest for Frank’s murderer signifies the potential of a twofold closure to Lionel: The resolution of the generic detective story, and the hope of a morally elevated formation of identity in which he might, eventually, become ‘the good detective’. However, as this imperative is strongly imbued with and directed by fictional elements, his intertextual sensibility keeps him from fully embodying the generic stereotype. Doubt is always around the corner; linguistic anxiety and nostalgic notions of his Tourettic orphan-self undermine his wisecracks, and he is, in fact, soon back at the level of *moratorium*. The hard-boiled route helps him to solve the case at the cost of neglecting his human uniqueness and fallacies.

Decisive to the final formative stage, in which a truer *identity achievement* is gained, is the acknowledgement of his uniqueness and capacity of free will that Frank plants in him. These aspects of his identity are further developed in his meeting with the female characters, Julia and Kimmery, who both contribute to questioning the authenticity of his detective-persona. In Julia Lionel finds his mirror image, the bleak result of having been forced to align to a generic hard-boiled template for too long. As the case reaches its closure, Lionel sheds his detective persona into the ocean, symbolically far removed from the secrecies and confines of the streets of Brooklyn.
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