



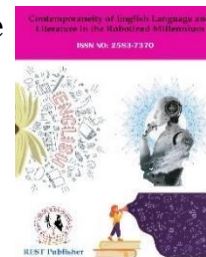
## Contemporaneity of English Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

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# The Architecture of Belonging: Abandonment, New Family Structures, and Home in Sarah Dessen's *Lock and Key*

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**Abstract:** This article investigates Sarah Dessen's 2008 novel, *Lock and Key*, examining how the central trauma of parental abandonment compels the protagonist, Ruby, to navigate new, estranged family structures and ultimately redefine her concept of "home." While consistent with Dessen's thematic focus on adolescent identity and family issues (Soria 56), this novel distinctively uses the abrupt displacement of the protagonist as the narrative engine. Drawing on the ability of Young Adult (YA) fiction to address serious topics in an accessible manner (Jewkes 49), the analysis demonstrates how *Lock and Key* tracks Ruby's journey from a state of profound alienation and low self-esteem to securing a new sense of belonging and stability. The novel's success lies in its use of a contemporary narrative to offer a cathartic experience, modeling the complex process of finding security after a fundamental familial crisis.

**Keywords:** Sarah Dessen, *Lock and Key*, Abandonment, Family Structures, Belonging, Identity, Young Adult Fiction, Home.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE CRISIS OF DISPLACEMENT IN YA FICTION

Sarah Dessen's novels are recognized for their commitment to realistic literary fiction, which allows for the exploration of a spectrum of topics relevant to adolescent life beyond simple romance (Soria 55). The critical reception, which often focuses on the superficial romance genre, overlooks the profound domestic drama and personal growth narratives that actually drive the plots. As with Dessen's other significant works, *Lock and Key* is structured around a major life event that leaves the protagonist vulnerable and removed from her former life patterns, initiating a quest for finding meaning and purpose in life (Jewkes 63).

In *Lock and Key*, the protagonist, Ruby, faces the abrupt and immediate crisis of parental abandonment, a type of familial failure often depicted in Dessen's wider canon (Soria 56). This trauma forces her to move in with her older, estranged, and financially established sister, Cora. This sudden displacement immediately places her in a completely foreign environment, sharply highlighting the theme of alienation. Dessen uses the concise and tighter, leaner structure of YA literature to sharply focus on the protagonist's emotional response to this trauma (Jewkes 45). The book, therefore, serves as a powerful narrative that leverages the accessibility of the genre to address the profound and serious topic of familial breakdown (Jewkes 49), all while charting the difficult, but ultimately empowering, process of identity reconstruction (Soria 56). The primary function of Dessen's novels is to allow readers to identify with characters and problematic issues they may be facing, a function that is powerfully executed through Ruby's relatable feelings of rootlessness.

## 2. FAMILY DYSFUNCTION: ABANDONMENT AND THE FRACTURED PAST

The primary conflict in *Lock and Key* is the sudden and total breakdown of Ruby's original family structure, which is a potent example of parental and sibling abandonment often addressed in Dessen's body of work (Soria 56).

1. **The Trauma of Abandonment:** Ruby's forced move is a direct result of her mother abandoning her, an act that is often a narrative proxy for larger themes of neglect and instability. This familial void leaves Ruby struggling with deep-seated issues of low self-esteem and a challenged sense of identity (Soria 56). The novel meticulously explores the emotional baggage and destructive behaviors Ruby carries as a consequence of this traumatic past. Her old life is symbolically represented as a literal "locked space"—a reference to the central metaphor of the title—reflecting her psychological need to emotionally shut down to cope with overwhelming feelings of loss and betrayal. For example, Ruby's initial reluctance to talk about her past and her difficulties with trust (Dessen 85) are direct consequences of the abandonment.
2. **Navigating the New Structure:** The novel establishes a sharp and effective contrast between Ruby's chaotic, unstable past and her sister Cora's organized, affluent, yet emotionally distant life. This new family structure—defined by financial comfort but emotional estrangement—forces Ruby to confront her past while attempting to fit into a new, often judgmental social and domestic environment. Cora initially serves as a reluctant or inverted parental figure, who must learn to accept the role of guardian while Ruby must learn to accept Cora's structured environment. This tension between the "lock" of Ruby's past and the potential "key" of her new life drives the narrative arc toward integration and healing.

### 3. PERSONAL HEALING: BUILDING AN ARCHITECTURE OF BELONGING

Ruby's healing process is characterized by her slow, resistant integration into her new life, ultimately leading to a redefinition of what a supportive family unit, and indeed, what home, actually means. Her journey exemplifies how Dessen's protagonists find catharsis by wrestling with their identity and developing varied, necessary relationships (Soria 55).

1. **Finding Solace and Security:** The protagonist finds healing not solely in romance, but in the stability offered by Cora's environment and the new, non-familial bonds she forms. She eventually finds solace in a core group of friendship that helps her process her dilemmas (Soria 56). These friendships allow her to move past her self-protective isolation, which is a common therapeutic arc for Dessen's characters (Soria 55). This process of opening up is synonymous with finding her self-worth and autonomy, replacing the feeling of being discarded with a feeling of being chosen and valued.
2. **Reclaiming Identity and Purpose:** Ruby's ultimate journey is one of learning to trust stability, which is essential to her personal growth and her ability to engage in critical thinking about her life choices (Soria 56). By the novel's conclusion, her acceptance of her new life and her reconciliation with Cora is a symbolic act of finding a secure connection and achieving a healing effect (Soria 57). She moves from an identity defined by lack and isolation to one defined by potential and belonging, demonstrating the power of the narrative to influence perspective (Jewkes 51) and find a new normal after the life-altering crisis (Jewkes 63). The novel's outcome affirms that the female protagonist, though troubled, is always multifaceted and capable of growth (Soria 55).

### 4. CONCLUSION: CATHARSIS, EMPATHY, AND THE MEANING OF HOME

*Lock and Key* offers a compelling narrative that exemplifies the educational power of YA fiction. By centering on the struggle for belonging after profound familial trauma, the novel acts as a crucial vehicle for building empathy by allowing the reader to feel things and look out through other eyes (Jewkes 41-42). This engagement helps readers move toward a cathartic experience through identification (Soria 55).

The novel confirms the significant critical value of Dessen's work. By faithfully charting Ruby's slow-earned emotional progress—from a state of being emotionally locked down to finding the key to her own future—*Lock and Key* provides not just an engaging story, but a crucial model for identification and catharsis for readers facing their own domestic and identity-related challenges. Its ultimate message is that "home" is not a physical structure, but an emotional architecture built on trust, stability, and the willingness to open oneself to new forms

of family. The success of the narrative lies in its tight, lean, and to-the-point structure, which allows the serious emotional issues to resonate clearly and profoundly with the reader (Jewkes 45).

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