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Confession and Catharsis: Trauma Disclosure in Colleen Hoover's Selected Novels

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Ministry of Higher Education
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Wasit University
College of Education for Human Sciences
Department of English Language and Literature



**Confession and Catharsis: Trauma Disclosure in Colleen
Hoover's Selected Novels**

A Thesis

submitted to the council of the College of Education for Human
Sciences/Wasit University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Education in English Literature

By:

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Supervisor's Certificate

I hereby certify that the thesis entitled: “**Confession and Catharsis: Trauma Disclosure in Colleen Hoover’s Selected Novels**”, by **Ali Abduljaleel Mohammed**, has been prepared and written under my supervision at the College of Education for Human Sciences/ Wasit University, as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for degree of Master of Education in English literature.

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Dedication

To my mother, who taught me that superheroes do not always wear capes, some simply show up every day with strength, love, and sacrifice. Your strength has been my foundation, and your guidance my compass. This work is as much yours as it is mine. Finally, to my friends, whose presence and emotional support have been instrumental in sustaining my scientific passion and driving me forward. I extend my sincere appreciation to all those who have supported me throughout this work, particularly my family and my friends, Ali Kareem and Anmar Ahmed.

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Abstract

In an age of psychological sensitivity and global transformation, the need to explore the fundamental question of traumatic wounds and recovery grows ever more, demanding the imperative of medical and literary studies to inspect the causes and consequences of traumatic injuries and psychological growth. Hence, this thesis investigates such a quest and argues against the silence of traumatic affliction, demonstrating that trauma constitutes a wound that demands expression. Such expression emerges through multiple narrative forms, including anonymous confession, artistic representation, verbal poetic disclosure, and autobiographical engagement with past and present experience. This study draws extensively on the theoretical contributions of trauma study experts such as Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, Dori Laub, and James Pennebaker, who explore the narrative dimensions of trauma and the complex relationship between traumatic experience, memory, and expression in selected novels by Colleen Hoover. Findings showed redemptive and therapeutic potential for sharing traumatic experiences with others whose traumatic pasts are equally troubling yet different in nature. In finding empathetic and supportive others, the characters in Hoover's novels were able to experience a psychological transformation and empowerment that drove them to alter the grand narrative of their lives and reauthor them. Thus, this study implies that by putting one's pain and fears into a narrative structure, traumatized individuals are then able to find reconciliation and discover alternative and more productive life narratives, which facilitate healing and encourage recovery.

Keywords: artistic coping, catharsis, communal sharing, narrative healing, trauma disclosure

Chapter One

1. A Historical Overview of Catharsis

In an age where psychological wounds often cut deeper than physical ones, trauma has emerged as a defining struggle of the modern era. From personal losses to global disasters, the scars left behind are not simply emotional but societal. As Judith Herman writes in her book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (2015), “Trauma is the affliction of the powerless” (p. 33). Trauma has become a defining element of the human condition, and the weight of unspoken trauma lingers in the shadow of our everyday life, shaping how we interact and view ourselves and others. The debate around it has never been more anxious, as more and more political, familial, and societal fractions are threatening our psychological well-being and the very core of what makes us human. Hence, the need to address and assimilate such a threatening psychological disease remains a pivotal endeavour if survivors are to find a psychological renewal.

Nonetheless, true survival goes way beyond enduring a traumatic injury; rather, almost paradoxically, it is finding reconciliation with it that defines the essence of traumatic recovery. Consequently, an examination of the need to tell or to experience a cathartic renewal raises some of the fundamental questions concerning trauma and the subsequent dilemma of silencing one’s wound and psychological upheaval. The controversy surrounding the efficacy of trauma disclosure and cathartic healing requires tracing back the root of the definition since “speechlessness versus the wish and fear to disclose the events forms the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (Schauer et al., 2011, p.3). In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth noted that trauma haunts the survivor, repeatedly “imposing itself” (p. 4) through nightmares, physical sensations, or behaviours. She described trauma as “always a story of a wound that cries out” (p. 4) to be heard and assimilated.

This study conceptualizes catharsis as a process of emotional release and psychological processing, examined here through its theoretical relevance to literary and psychological discourse. Catharsis typically involves the release of deeply held intense emotions like anger or sadness, which leads to a reduction in emotional distress feelings and may even foster a rise in positive emotions. Recently, certain therapeutic approaches like psychodrama, primal therapy, narrative therapy, and emotion-focused therapy incorporate catharsis as a central method to bring about positive change. However, modern research on the effectiveness of cathartic techniques in psychotherapy is limited and offers conflicting evidence regarding its impact in practice.

The term “catharsis” itself is rooted in the Greek word *katharsis*, meaning a cleansing, purification, or purging (Schaefer & Drewes, 2013, p. 71). Most definitions emphasize two principal dimensions: the emotional dimension, entailing intense expression and processing of emotions, and the cognitive dimension, which entails acquiring insight, attaining new realizations, and bringing unconscious information to consciousness, which together facilitate positive transformation. Aristotle described catharsis as a “purging of the spirit of morbid and base ideas or emotions by witnessing the playing out of such emotions or ideas on stage” (Aristotle, 1941/2001, p. 1458).

For Aristotle, the purgative nature of tragedy with its music is what makes a work of drama valuable since it drives the emotions of the audience to their peaks and, while intensifying them, facilitates an emotional release evoked by the audience’s feeling of identification and relation with the hero’s tragedy and subsequently made meaningful. The pain and suffering of the hero raise the feeling of pity and fear in the audience who feel connected and are shocked and later emotionally ventilated, the thing that causes a modification of their senses and a change in their worldviews. Aristotle defines tragedy as:

Tragedy, then is a representation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language pleasurably and variously embellished suitably to the different parts of the play; in the form of actions directly presented, not narrated; with incidents arousing pity and fear in such a way as to accomplish a purgation (katharsis) of such emotions. (Aristotle, 1951, p. 27)

In his influential book *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970), Henri Ellenberger, a Canadian psychiatrist, explores the history and development of dynamic psychiatry. He points out that the methods used to trigger an emotional crisis and manage the subsequent release were remarkably similar across different eras and practices. Whether it was temple priests, religious exorcists, somnambulists, mesmerists, hypnotists, or early cathartic psychotherapists like Janet, Breuer, and Freud, the core approach remained the same. The only real difference over time was the language and beliefs used to describe and understand this process of crisis, release, and relief.

1.1 Religious Catharsis: The Path to Purification

Religious catharsis was, and still is for many across the world, a spiritual yet psychological cleansing process aimed at finding reconciliation for our mental afflictions. According to Roland Knox in his book *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (1951), the basis of almost every new religious cult is the discovery or rediscovery of rituals that provide cathartic release. Before a new religion is put up as the path to salvation, people go through periods of intense emotional tension and worry. Similarly, excessive emotional arousal and the release of sentiments were essential components of the revivalist religious movement during the eighteenth century. Revival meetings were administered by a minister, skilled in oratory and in the techniques of evoking high levels of emotion in his audience who were conditioned to anticipate an extremely emotional experience. Such gatherings regularly

end with conversions happening in the present, frequently dramatic and sometimes involving long-lasting behaviour changes.

One of these instances of religious catharsis and healing is recounted in a journal by John Wesley, an eighteenth-century English priest and theologian, whose preaching made audiences start “trembling, weeping and swooning away, till every appearance of life was gone, and the extremities of the body assumed the coldness of a corpse. At one meeting not less than a thousand persons fell to the ground apparently without sense or motion” (as cited in Hawkins, 1986, p. 9).

The healing powers of such meetings were clearly cathartic in nature since they had the attendees experiencing somatic changes that left some “seized with strong pain, and constrained to roar for the disquietness of their heart. But it was not long before they likewise burst forth into praise to God their Savior” (Knox, 1951, pp. 520-521). Wesley recounts in his journal a visit by a physician who, despite being skeptical of such events, could hardly believe his eyes as he witnessed a woman he had known for years breaking into strong cries and tears:

He went and stood close to her, and observes every symptom, till great drops of sweat ran down her face and all her bones shook. He then knew not what to think, being clearly convinced it was not fraud nor yet any natural disorder. But when both her soul and body were healed in a moment, he acknowledged the finger of God. (as cited in Hawkins, 1986, p. 10).

Miss Swan, an eighteenth-century revivalist, describes another case of religious conversion that led to behavioural changes in a troubled woman, stating: “she was in a rocking chair, with her hands clasped upon her breast, and gnashing her teeth as though she would take them out of her head, and was past speaking” (Nichols & Zax, 1977, p. 27). She continues, “As I stood before her, I gained a view of the finally lost in hell” (p. 27).

Similarly, another form of religious renewal, which is relevant to the pursuit of healing and catharsis, lies in the very act of confession. Confession is a challenging topic, and it is often a distressing experience, since it implies that one has committed a sin or a transgression of some sort. The concept of confession is intrinsically linked to the notion of forgiveness and absolution. Forgiveness is as soothing and agreeable as confessing is arduous and distressing. In his book *Penance and Absolution* (1961), John Barton, a British Anglican priest and biblical scholar, reveals that confession is “the accusation that a man makes of his own sins to a priest, with a view to necessary absolution.” (p. 65).

The Psalms beautifully capture the freedom and liberation following self-disclosure or confessing one’s sin to a priest or a god, leading to a profound sense of forgiveness and absolution: “blest is he whose transgression is forgiven ... when I declared not my sin, my body wasted away... I acknowledged my sin to thee and I did not hide my iniquity... then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin” (Fisher & Shueman, 2013, p. 18). Similar to how self-disclosure serves as the cornerstone and foundation of spiritual development, psychotherapy aims to enlighten one’s relationship with his deeper self to eventually reach that state of inner peace. St. John Climacus, an ascetic from the seventh century, explained the role a priest can assume as a spiritual mediator and eloquently described the therapeutic exchange such an encounter can foster: “Lay bare your wound to your spiritual physician. Without being ashamed say: “Here is my fault, Father. Here is my illness” (Nemeck & Coombs, 1993, p. 67).

Powerful emotional moments, especially those that are dramatic or unsettling, can strongly influence and reshape a person’s mentality. As William James, an American psychologist and eighteenth-century religious revivalist, noted in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), “Emotional occasions, especially violent ones, are extremely potent in precipitating mental rearrangements” (p. 157). In the same vein, Carl Jung affirms in his book *The Practice of Psychotherapy: Essays on the Psychology of the Transference and*

Other Subjects (1954) the value of confession by stating that “The first beginnings of all analytical treatment ... are to be found in its prototype, the confessional” (p.55). Jung considered confession to be beneficial for psychological well-being. He believed its main advantage was the relief of tension it provided, leading to a sense of reconciliation. Jung (1961) argued that:

The tremendous feeling of relief which usually follows a confession can be ascribed to the readmission of the lost sheep into the human community. His moral isolation and seclusion, which were so difficult to bear, cease. Herein lies the chief psychological value of confession. (p. 192)

Furthermore, Jung (1954) argued that all personal secrets create a sense of sin or guilt, regardless of whether they are morally wrong. Withholding such secrets causes psychological regression which isolates individuals from others in their social circle. He remarked that “Once the human mind had succeeded in inventing the idea of sin, man had recourse to psychic concealment, or, in analytical parlance, repression arose” (p. 55). He further added that “Anything concealed is a secret. The possession of secrets acts like a psychic poison that alienates their possessor from the community” (p.55). Similarly, in his book *The History of Sexuality: Volume I, an Introduction* (1978), the French post-structuralist thinker Michel Foucault referred to humans as “the confessing animal” (p. 59) suggesting that the act of confession is central to our human identity.

There are clear similarities between revivalist ministers and psychotherapists, particularly those who focus on cathartic therapy. Both emphasise the importance of personal experience and strong emotions, offering a powerful emotional release that can be incredibly comforting for those who are afraid of their own feelings. What therapists refer to as releasing repressed emotions, preachers describe as the Holy Spirit cleansing one’s unspiritual nature.

Additionally, whether in the face of religious doubt or psychological struggle, the confusion and fear of the unknown can make people highly receptive to the guidance of any authoritative figure, whether it's a preacher or a therapist (Nichols & Zax, 1977).

Similarly, magical rituals have offered a space for emotional arousal and release that has been cathartic throughout history, as most of these early magical practices focused on managing emotional tension and finding ways to release it or prevent its accumulation. The English anthropologist Evans-Pritchard pointed out that "magic is a substitute activity in situations in which practical means to attain an end are lacking, and its function is either cathartic or stimulating, giving men courage, relief, hope, tenacity" (as cited in Hawkins, 1986, p. 4). One of the main limitations of religious and magical rites was their infrequent occurrence, rigid ritualisation, and disconnection from daily life. As Pierce et al. (1983) explained,

the catharsis they provided was also isolated, rather than being incorporated into everyday experience. Although they unquestionably did a great deal of good, we think that vivid expressions of feeling are therapeutic not because they exorcise 'evil spirits' or 'repressed affects', but because they help people to become more feelingful, thoughtful and active. (p. 30)

Shamanism was yet another form of healing method, with the shamans acting as folk therapists and spiritual healers in early communities. People had faith in their magical skills, which fostered their expectation of the efficacy of such rituals, especially once the afflicted revealed their feelings. Shamans would first execute seemingly miraculous feats to establish their power and heighten expectation. A defining component of these rites was the shaman's performance. Dressed in ornate, unearthly garb, they would leap and convulse uncontrollably while speaking in an incomprehensible spirit language, which signifies their journey to retrieve the lost spirits from the spiritual world. Meanwhile, the crowd engaged in singing, shouting,

and dancing, fueling tremendous emotional responses in both the sick and the viewers, “Shamanistic healing rituals provided somatic-emotional catharsis through bodily movement and vigorous expressions of emotion. They also provided cognitive-emotional catharsis through remembering and 'confessing' a series of distressing experiences” (Pierce et al., 1983, p. 29).

In his book *Magic, Science and Religion* (1955), the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski argued that the fundamental purpose of both religious and magical ceremonies is cathartic, since they alleviate anxiety and tensions. He explained that “In the magic of terror, in the exorcism directed against powers of darkness and evil, the magician behaves as if he himself were overcome by the emotion of fear, or at least violently struggling against it” (p. 71). He added, “Shouts, brandishing of weapons, the use of lighted torches, form often the substance of this rite. Or else in an act, recorded by myself, to ward off the evil powers of darkness, a man has ritually to tremble, to utter a spell slowly as if paralysed by fear” (p.71). Though some principle of magic justifies and explains these actions, they are obviously manifestations of feeling. As a consequence of such cathartic practices, a decrease in tension occurs. The magician serves as a model by acting as if he is overtaken by fear himself, and in an environment of ritual and mystery, his expression of these sentiments may easily prove to be contagious. Moreover, by shaking ritually, a man is prone to produce a considerable emotional excitation and release.

1.2 The Evolution of Catharsis in Psychology

The idea of emotional catharsis has a long history in psychotherapy. The cathartic approach was initially outlined by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer in the context of their clinical investigations of patients suffering from hysteria. The term catharsis refers to a method wherein a patient physically and vocally expresses powerful emotions while mentally reliving, typically under hypnosis, an early traumatic incident. Based on Freud and Breuer’s case

investigations, this discharge or purging of strong emotion was assumed to result in an alleviation of neurotic symptoms. The notion of catharsis argues that the recalling and thorough retelling of a painful incident may assist emotional release and, subsequently, lead to a reduction in symptoms. The first psychotherapeutic position on the subject was advanced by Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer in the following statement from their book *Studies on Hysteria* (1955):

The patient only gets free from the hysterical symptom by reproducing the pathogenic impressions that caused it and by giving utterance to them with the expression of affect and thus the therapeutic task consists solely in inducing him to do so. (p. 283)

Freud's explanation of catharsis also relied on a hydraulic model. He suggested that emotions, when not released, build up in this inner space, gradually creating tension. This tension must be released or ventilated as unexpressed affect accumulates pressure that can ultimately lead to harm. Freud likened these emotions to steam in a kettle: if the steam cannot escape, the kettle risks exploding under the pressure. Breuer and Freud noted that the memories linked to hysteria, those that play a key role in the development of hysterical symptoms often endure over time with surprising clarity. What sets these memories apart is that they typically remain outside the person's conscious awareness. Because of this, Breuer and Freud believed that such traumatic experiences could only be accessed with the necessary intensity when the patient was in a hypnotic state (Nichols & Zax, 1977).

The critical case of Bertha Pappenheim marks one of the five cases in which Freud utilized hypnotism in unveiling a traumatic past and attempting to overcome the mind's defenses. Bertha was suffering from paralysis and weakness of limbs, speech disturbances (inability to speak German at times), visual disturbances and hallucinations. Freud was first introduced to her case by his friend Joseph Breuer, who, after treating her for two years,

concluded that her symptomatology revealed two alternate states of personality. A hysterical double personality which exhibited one state as being anxious but relatively normal during the daytime while “In the other state she hallucinated and was ‘naughty’ - that is to say she was abusive” (Breuer & Freud, 1955, p. 24) in the nighttime.

Breuer soon realised that he could facilitate a shift in Bertha’s personality, allowing her to move from her usual self to what she referred to as her bad self. He also observed that when he repeated to her, under autohypnosis in the evenings, the unsettling words she had expressed during her dissociative episodes, she was able to recover the repressed content of her hallucinations. This process alleviated her symptoms, and Bertha playfully described it as her talking cure, sometimes referring to it humorously as chimney sweeping. Over time, Bertha developed a structured approach in which she recounted to Breuer every past experience linked to each of her symptoms. She continued this narrative exploration until she arrived at the initial instance of the symptom’s appearance, at which point the symptom would vanish. Breuer referred to this therapeutic technique as catharsis, and he demonstrated that all of Bertha’s symptoms could be addressed through this same method. Breuer noted that

each individual symptom in this complicated case was taken separately in hand; all the occasions on which it had appeared were described in reverse order, starting before the time when the patient became bedridden and going back to the event which had led to its first appearance. (Breuer & Freud, 1955, p. 35)

While working with Emmy von N, Freud’s other patient, he transitioned from using hypnosis and suggestion as active interventions to a more passive listening approach, allowing the patient to share her story at her own pace. Emmy asked Freud “not to keep asking her where this and that came from, but to let her” tell him “What she had to say” (Breuer & Freud, 1955, p. 36). By following her request, Freud realized that her narrative was not as aimless as he

initially thought. Instead, her story was a thorough recollection of past memories intertwined with new experiences that had influenced her since their last conversation. Freud noted that “It was as if she had adopted my procedure and was making use of the conversation, apparently unconstrained and guided by chance, as a supplement to her hypnosis” (p. 56). This is the first documented instance of what became a pivotal element in analytical therapy: the patient’s free associations paired with the analyst’s evenly suspended attention. In its ideal form, this dynamic allows analysts, while listening to a narrative, to discern the underlying expression of another story.

However, there are a couple of reservations which apparently led Freud to abandon the cathartic method. One is that he found it difficult for different patients to be hypnotised and thus to be provoked into a cathartic expression. Instead, he urged his patients to free associate in typical consciousness, past recollections which were significant in their treatment. A second reason would be that he found the cathartic method to be treating symptoms rather than the predisposing factors underlying their hysterical condition. Freud also expressed concern that the use of catharsis, on its own, offered little opportunity to explore the formation of psychological resistance, an important factor in understanding the emergence of symptoms. In cathartic treatment, the focus tends to be on emotional release rather than on examining the patient’s life history and the sequence of events that contributed to the onset of their condition (Nichols & Zax, 1977).

Pierre Janet, a contemporary psychologist of Freud, had also used hypnotism to uncover past memories to treat traumatic neurosis. In his book *Psychological Healing: A Historical and Clinical Study* (1925), Janet observed that many patients had struggled with disquieting memories and noted that “Again and again psychopathologists have pointed out that a good many neuropathic disorders are induced by an emotion, a disquietude, a grief resulting from some particular happening” (p. 589). Janet came to realise that traumatic memories, especially

horrific ones, cause a split in personality or a dissociation in memory, following a high emotional shocking experience. He maintained that while traumatic memories were not the sole cause of neuroses, they were often implicated and thus should be considered. For genuine healing to take place, Janet argued, it was not sufficient merely to recall the traumatic event; the individual also needed an opportunity to internally complete the emotional or psychological response that had been disrupted or left unfinished at the time.

Janet initially tried using hypnosis to help patients forget their traumatic experiences, but the results fell short of expectations. Realizing this approach was not effective, he turned to a similar cathartic method. Janet described it in the following manner: “Just as, in another method of treatment, we dispel symptoms by helping the subject to perform the outwardly directed actions demanded by extant situations, so now we must help them to perform internal actions related to past happenings” (p. 679). This process was believed to help liquidate the traumatic memory and the neurotic symptoms that followed. Interestingly, Janet’s theory behind this was quite similar to ideas held by modern-day emotional therapists. He proposed that when a person experiences an event that demands a response, it creates a psychological tension. This tension can also bring up unresolved tension from past similar experiences. The buildup of pressure seeks release through action and emotional expression.

In 1925, Janet pointed out that confession has a powerful emotional charge which may be why it often brings a sense of relief or healing. Despite his very strong support of the therapeutic value of catharsis, Janet believed that symptoms may recur, and cathartic treatment may need to be repeated. He stated,

The complete expression of the emotions, which is rarely achieved in these patients (who are reserved alike by system and because they are impotent), often has a remarkable effect when it does occur. Many of the patients become unrecognisable if we can only make

them cry. After a fit of weeping, which is sometimes very difficult to induce, their obsessive ideas of persecution, the airs they put on, their stiffness, their incessant doubts, and their resistance, will disappear as if by magic. (p. 1010)

Since then, the dispute around the cathartic method or the talking cure has been disputed between those who advocate it as an essential therapeutic element and those who question its effectiveness. Several therapeutic approaches such as primal therapy, psychodrama, gestalt therapy and re-evaluation counselling, highlight the importance of cathartic release in their treatment of patients.

During World War I, the ideas of Freud and Janet about repressed emotional memories had a significant impact on how early clinicians approached psychological issues in soldiers, what was then commonly called war neuroses. One prominent figure in this area was William Brown, who strongly supported the use of hypnotic abreaction therapy. Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, William Brown (1920) argued that guiding soldiers to express and release the powerful emotions tied to their traumatic combat experiences could help them heal mentally. He wrote, “Considered in a rough popular manner the facts seem to indicate that liberation of pent-up emotion... produces a resolution of the functional symptom” (p. 16-17).

Brown’s approach centred on using hypnosis to help patients revisit their traumatic memories. While under hypnosis, he would guide them through those painful experiences, encouraging them to bring suppressed emotions to the surface and fully express them. He explained, “we bring up the repressed experience once more, we encourage him to work off the emotion involved in it. Just as a person finds relief in tears, who grieves for someone he has lost so we let these patients work off their fear” (As cited in Hawkins, 1986, p. 63). For Brown, this emotional release or abreaction was key to dismantling the psychological defenses that kept traumatic memories buried, as he puts it,

Abreaction of repressed emotion sweeps away the repression and so frees energy which had been previously needed to hold the repressed memories apart from the rest of the mind and away from clear consciousness. This freed energy is thus put once more at the general disposal of the personality. (p. 64)

In the Second World War, there was a strong need to address psychological trauma by using hypnotic abreaction as a treatment method. Central nervous system drugs such as sodium pentothal, a chloroform-ether mix (one part chloroform to two parts ether), nitrous oxide, hydrobromide, alcohol, sodium amytal, and ether, along with a single stimulant, scopolamine, were used to calm the brain's higher centres, creating a semi-intoxicated state that lowered inhibitions, much like the effects of mild alcohol intoxication. Although each practitioner had their own way of doing things, the heart of the process was always catharsis. Patients were either put under hypnosis or given sedatives, then gently encouraged to revisit their most painful memories, reliving them in a raw, emotional, and often dramatic way (Nichols & Zax, 1977). The overall theory behind these treatments was still largely rooted in psychoanalysis. As Roy Grinker and John Spiegel remarked in their book *Men under Stress* (1963), "the unconscious sources of anxiety should be unearthed and ventilated, and the ego permitted and educated to deal with them rationally and economically" (p. 159).

In *Hypnotherapy of War Neuroses* (1949), John Watkins, an American psychologist best known for his work in the areas of hypnosis, dissociation, and multiple personalities, outlined the cathartic methods used during the Second World War, which were also firmly based in psychoanalytic theory. Coming back from war, the soldiers had to be admitted into army hospitals, far away from the front lines, in a safer and quieter environment. Once there, they were asked to reenact their combat experiences, which were blocked from memory. Watkins used simple metaphors to describe the success of abreaction and how it worked: "The

repressed conflict like an infected boil is ‘lanced’ and the repressed pathogenic material released” (p. 9). Watkins’ approach appeared effective in treating cases of acute stress disorder and helped in reducing anxiety and bringing unconscious guilt to surface. However, some cases had proven to be more complicated due to higher emotional arousal or unbearable combat burden, and while they showed signs of improvement at first, the symptoms seemed to return, at which rate Watkins advised for more in-depth therapy.

2. Processing Memories in Modern Psychology

Following the end of the Second World War, the interest in traumatic memories and mainly the articulation of trauma, or healing narratives in general, resurfaced once again in the medical domain. Dori Laub, a psychiatrist and child survivor of the Holocaust known for his work on trauma testimony, and Shoshana Felman, an American literary critic, published their seminal work, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), in pursuit of addressing the need of Holocaust survivors to articulate their trauma and the challenges they face in formulating a narrative account of their horrific past, or, in Shoshana Felman’s words, to examine the “crisis of truth... proceeding from contemporary trauma” (p. 6).

However, since the survivors had to endure unspeakable pain and torture, the urge to narrate their experiences was extremely difficult, as the events were dissociated for many. Caruth (1996) highlighted one of these challenges in her description of trauma, where one of the key components of trauma is a lack of direct access to the event within the conscious memory of the victim: “The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (p.4-5).

Similarly, in their journal article *The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma* (1991), van der Kolk and van der Hart emphasised that “Narrative

memory consists of mental constructs, which people use to make sense out of experience . . . under extreme conditions existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experience” (p.427). In these cases, the traumatic event does not get stored in the person’s conscious memory. Instead, it gets buried in the subconscious and later shows up as unwanted, intrusive experiences, like flashbacks or vivid, unsettling dreams. Yet, to facilitate healing, a conscious narration of the event is a must if the psychological symptoms are to be reduced, a fact which van der Kolk and van der Hart both endorse. They argued that “traumatic memories...need to be integrated with existing mental schemes and be transformed into narrative language” (p.447).

The Holocaust represents a fundamental period in history where the experience of trauma and the need for narration were profoundly challenged. When it comes to a traumatic historical event like the Holocaust, telling one’s story is not just a personal act; it can also become a powerful public statement. As Laub (1992) points out, for storytelling to truly help the survivor begin to heal, it requires more than just speaking; it needs an

address to hearing; for only when the survivor knows he is being heard, will he stop to hear—and listen to—himself. Thus, when the flow of fragments falters, the listener has to enhance them and induce their free expression. (p. 71)

In other words, for a survivor’s story to be meaningful, there must be someone genuinely listening, someone who can take in and acknowledge the full weight of what’s being shared. Trauma makes this process difficult, as it complicates the role of narrator and listener and destabilises such a task. Laub reinforces Caruth’s view when he says that “The victim’s narrative – the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma – does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence” (p. 57).

For Laub, what unblocks the hidden and unspeakable part of trauma lies in the presence of a witness who acts as “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (p. 57). Without an external witness to the telling of the story of trauma, the testimony cannot fully be told, and the victims remain locked in their own experience, unable to process what happened. Laub contended that “Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other” (p. 70) The act of listening becomes an act of co-witnessing, where the listener shares part of the emotional burden: “The listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (p.57). The role of the listener is of such great value, for Laub, that their absence may cause “a return of the trauma—a re-experiencing of the event itself” (p. 67).

One instance of how trauma cries out to be witnessed is recorded by Abraham Lewin, a historian and Holocaust survivor, who reflects on the impossibility of expressing versus the need to articulate traumatic pain in his diary, which was later published as *A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto* (1988). Lewin after seeing his wife, Luba, who was taken by the Nazis to Treblinka, a place which was one of the most notorious Nazi extermination camps, expressed, “Eclipse of the sun, universal blackness. My Luba was taken away” (p. 45). While faithfully keeping a diary, he questioned the value of putting into words the terrifying reality he faced,

But perhaps because the disaster is so great there is nothing to be gained by expressing in words everything that we feel. Only if we were capable of tearing out by the force of our pent-up anguish the greatest of all mountains, a Mount Everest, and with all our hatred and strength hurling it down on the heads of the German murderers

of our young and old — this would be the only fitting reaction on our part. (p. 97)

Near the end of her interview at the Yale Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, a woman who had survived the Holocaust expressed profoundly that “We wanted to survive so we could live just one day after Hitler, so that we could tell our story” (Laub and Felman, 1992, p. 78). Laub (1992) contended that the opposite is equally true, suggesting that telling the story is not just a result of survival; it's a condition for it,

The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story. (p. 78)

For Laub, such a narrative process helps victims to confront psychological burdens, guilt and grief, which for many victims are “ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself” (p. 78). Survival is not merely physical, since one has to integrate their traumatic past into a coherent story which gives meaning and is a form of claiming agency over one's life and identity and thus uncovering this buried truth of trauma, or as Laub puts it, “One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life” (p.78).

In the same vein, Caruth noted that “trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (p. 4). This traumatic wound presents “a crisis that is marked, not by simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (p. 5). In her book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (2002), Susan J. Brison, an American philosopher and two-time rape survivor, emphasized that “narrating memories to others (who are strong and empathic

enough to be able to listen) enables survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma” (p. 71). She also noted that

Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self. (p. 71)

Schauer et al. (2011) argued that it is only “by putting words to the trauma, victims are empowered to overcome their sense of speechlessness and lack of explicit memory” (p.3). Bessel van der Kolk noted in his book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014) that “While trauma keeps us dumbfounded, the path out of it is paved with words, carefully assembled, piece by piece, until the whole story can be revealed” (p.234). He also remarked that

Silence about trauma also leads to death—the death of the soul. Silence reinforces the godforsaken isolation of trauma. Being able to say aloud to another human being, “I was raped” or “I was battered by my husband” ... is a sign that healing can begin. (p. 234)

However, van der Kolk expressed the difficulty survivors face in composing a testimonial narrative, “it is enormously difficult to organize one’s traumatic experience into a coherent account—a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end” (p. 43). Similarly, Herman (2015) spoke about the difficulty of creating such narrative and described the difficulties patients face when confronted for the first time in therapy by their traumas, “as the [therapeutic] narrative closes in on the most unbearable moments, the patient finds it more and more difficult to use words. At times the patient may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing or painting” (p.177). Nonetheless, according to

Herman, a narrative allows us to move back and forth, to reformulate, re-read or re-interpret our experiences, and this is crucial for one's recovery process during which one may review "issues that have already been addressed many times in order to deepen and expand the survivor's integration of the meaning of her experience" (p. 213).

Clinical psychologists who study the effects of trauma on both mind and body often emphasise that trauma can be so overwhelming, both in the moment and in its aftermath, that putting the experience into words becomes incredibly difficult. Van der Kolk (2014) argued that "Trauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or an imaginable past" (p. 43). Nonetheless, Richard J. McNally, an American psychologist, questions the idea that traumatic memories are beyond verbal expression, which was proposed by van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Weisa in the following excerpt from their book, *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (1996),

complicate the capacity to communicate about traumatic experiences is that memories of trauma may have no verbal (explicit) component whatsoever. Instead, the memories may have been organized on an implicit or perceptual level, without any accompanying narrative about what happened. (p.287)

Drawing on the work of Bessel van der Kolk, Roger Luckhurst in his book *The Trauma Question* (2008) claimed that "Trauma is engraved in the mind under distinct conditions, etched in by the heightened adrenaline of the physiological reaction to bodily stress. It is also an explicitly nonverbal, non-narrative memory" (p. 148). However, in his book *Remembering Trauma* (2005), Richard J. McNally rejected the idea that traumatised patients suffer from amnesia; rather, he suggested that the traumatic memories are enhanced by arguing that "Contrary to van der Kolk's theory, trauma does not block the formation of narrative memory.

That memory for trauma can be expressed as physiologic reactivity to traumatic reminders does not preclude its being expressed in narrative as well” (p. 180). He further contended that “As Lawrence Langer (1991) has thoroughly documented, survivors of the Nazi Holocaust readily provide detailed narrative accounts of their horrific experiences” (p. 180).

McNally (2005) acknowledged that traumatic memories could be altered or distorted over time, but he firmly rejected the idea that such memories are completely inaccessible or missing,

People who have experienced harrowingly close brushes with death (such as falling off a mountain) often report extreme dissociative alterations in consciousness (time slowing down, everything seeming unreal), yet they remain fully capable of providing detailed narrative accounts of their experiences. (p. 182)

The view on the difficulty of processing traumatic memories is equally shared by Dominick LaCapra in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2014). LaCapra described how trauma disrupts our usual sense of time, creating a state where the past and present coexist or in his words creates “double inscription of time” (p. 21). This makes trauma testimony difficult to articulate,

one is both back there and here at the same time, and one is able to distinguish between (not dichotomize) the two. In other words, one remembers — perhaps to some extent still compulsively reliving or being possessed by — what happened then without losing a sense of existing and acting now. (p. 90)

It is perhaps this unsettling sensation of being caught in two temporal dimensions, the traumatic past, which compulsively resists articulation and acts as a reliving of the experience, and the present which yet lacks an integration of the event into a narrative structure that renders

trauma testimony as a void in-between. Recently, two approaches of traumatic disclosure, mainly narrative therapy and expressive writing, have been deeply connected to the pursuit of traumatic engagement with traumatic memories and the power of individuals to claim agency through the act of narration. Since the central dilemma for many survivors of trauma is that they must tell their stories, and yet their stories cannot be told.

3. Exploring Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy, which is rooted in postmodern thoughts, helps clients to move beyond pathological ideology which labels individuals as problems by encouraging them to reauthor their lives and expand their narrative of who they are and their relation to the problems they encounter, changing that relationship to a more unique one through the retelling of these stories. Developed by Michael White and David Epston (1990) and later expanded upon by Alice Morgan (2000), narrative therapy seeks to empower individuals to consider alternative narratives which move individuals away from the dominant problem-centered stories. What narrative therapy tries to do is bring those overlooked elements back into the light, helping people see that their identity is not defined by their struggles, but shaped by a fuller, more complex story, and subsequently undermining the problem-centered narrative which brings individuals into a state of depressive thoughts or drown out other important threads: strengths, forgotten moments of hope, or hidden potential (Freeman et al., 1997).

Narrative therapy takes a unique approach; it encourages individuals and groups to step back and reflect on the stories they have been telling about themselves. Whether individually or in groups, narrative therapy helps survivors to re-examine the ways they have been telling their own stories, leading them to consider newer narratives which propagate growth, strength and change as Michael White (2011) explained, “As people become more narratively resourced . . . they find that they have available to them options for action that would not have otherwise been imaginable” (p.5). According to White (2004), the goal of narrative therapy is to expand

the individual's or group's "options in self-formation" (p.43). Narrative therapy practitioners work toward this goal by helping individuals or groups to re-author or re-story conversations, allowing them to discover new possibilities for action and enhancing their ability to respond to these opportunities. In both its approach and objectives, narrative therapy "seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counseling and community work, which centers people as the experts in their own lives" (Morgan, 2000, p. 4).

Narrative therapy, in essence, gives people the tools to take charge of their mental health. Through specific techniques, it encourages individuals to assume responsibility for their well-being and approach it with a sense of agency and purpose. It empowers people with practical tools to enhance self-management of mental health. Although narrative therapy is a form of talking cure, it does not focus on uncovering past causes of present trauma, instead, it operates on the premise, "Change the overarching narrative representation and deeper and more extensive opportunities for engaging in novel behaviors can be achieved" (Russell et al., 2004, p. 215). Thus, narrative therapy primarily aims to use narrative techniques to encourage individuals to build a more positive "future trajectory rather than focusing on past accuracy" (Graham, 2010, p. 14).

According to White (1993), narrative therapy revolves around "the deconstruction of self-narrative and the dominant cultural knowledges that persons live by; the deconstruction of practices of self and of relationship that are dominantly cultural; and the deconstruction of the discursive practices of our culture" (p. 35). He further explains that

Deconstruction has to do with procedures that subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices: those so-called truths that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production; those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices;

and those familiar practices of self and of relationship that are subjugating of persons' lives. (p. 34)

The aim of this process is to “become aware of the extent to which certain modes of life and thought shape our existence, and that we might then be in a position to choose to live by other modes of life and thought” (p. 35). This process of deconstruction is at the heart of narrative therapy. White and Epston argued in their book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (1990) that problems are deeply intertwined with the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they are created, and such context serves as the foundation for the stories people construct and share about themselves, “the text analogy provides a frame that enables a consideration of the broader socio-political context of persons' lives and relationships, and that Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge can provide us with some details of that broader context” (p. 27). They also contended that individuals mistakenly contribute to their problems by assigning specific meanings to their experiences, noting that such meanings are central to the way people behave and perceive themselves. Meaning emerges through language, shaped by the context in which it is used and by how it carries our thoughts, feelings, and lived histories.

Narrative therapy is deeply influenced by the philosophical views of Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian thinker whose work, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), challenged how language and meaning are conventionally viewed and interpreted. Rather than simply found in the world and maintained by practical agreement, Wittgenstein argued that meaning is actively created through our interactions. Language is a social and cultural tool, and its meaning is shaped by social rules that are intertwined with cultural understanding which posit a certain interpretation of language and meaning. This meaning is shaped by norms and unspoken cultural understanding which set how language is interpreted. In other words, we are socialized into a linguistic and cultural system, and we cannot assign meanings to language as

radical constructionism suggests. Narrative therapy, by exploring meaning and helping individuals uncover alternative ways of understanding their experiences, offers a clear departure from biologically based psychological models that assume behaviour stems from underlying structures or inherent dysfunctions (Besley, 2002).

Narrative therapy offers room for people to re-examine and map how the problem-saturated narrative of a person's life has influenced their lived experiences, inspired by Derrida's concept of deconstruction, which seeks to externalize the problem by uncovering "hidden meanings, spaces or gaps, and evidence of conflicting stories" (Drewery & Winslade, 1997, p. 43). Only as people manage to detach from this dominant problem saturated narrative, they notice what Erving Goffman (1961) referred to as "unique outcomes" (p.127). This shift allows them to "experience a sense of personal agency" and "a capacity to intervene in their own lives and relationships" (White and Epston, 1990, p.16), driving them to reconstruct their narrative and reauthor their life stories. Narrative therapy draws out from Foucault's perspective on power as not purely destructive but rather creative and consequently influencing the people's lives and thoughts. White & Epston (1990) wrote:

According to Foucault, a primary effect of this power through "truth" and "truth" through power is the specification of a form of individuality that is, in turn, a "vehicle" of power. Rather than proposing that this form of power represses, Foucault argues that it subjugates. It forges persons as "docile bodies" and conscripts them into activities that support the proliferation of "global" and "unitary" knowledges and, as well, the techniques of power. (p. 20)

Wendy Drewery and John Winslade (1997) identify four foundational concepts in narrative therapy: language, knowledge, power, and self that define its approach. Language, they argue, goes beyond simply reflecting our thoughts and feelings. Instead, it actively shapes

how we experience and interact with the world: “How we speak is an important determinant of how we can be in the world. So what we say, and how we say it, matter” (p. 34). Similarly, knowledge within narrative therapy is viewed not as something external or fixed, but as something “we make—rather than something that is given, separate and apart from us” (p. 48). This post-modern making of sense “asserts that there are many truths, and that what one person holds as sensible and true may not be so for another” (p. 49).

At the heart of narrative therapy, power is viewed as a concept which helps people to break free from the “subjugating grasp of the dominant discourses [or standards] of the culture” (Gergen, 1999, p. 173). By revealing and deconstructing these dominant narratives, individuals can engage more freely with their own unique contexts and experiences (Monk & Gerhart, 2003). Rejecting fixed inner essence, narrative therapy views the self as “a process or activity that occurs in the space between people” (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 34). This view acknowledges that while individuals play a significant role in shaping who they become, they are also influenced by their surrounding circumstances: “We have a major part to play in our own becoming, but we cannot simply decide who we will be” (Drewery & Winslade, 1997, p. 47). Together, the ideas of language, knowledge, power, and the self come together to form a rich and cohesive foundation for understanding what makes narrative therapy distinct.

4. The Healing Power of Words

The therapeutic use of writing, though evolving over time, is hardly a new approach; as early as the 18th century, it was recognized for its ability to relieve patient tension (McKinney, 1976). Throughout the past century, it has often been integrated with spoken psychotherapy (Riordan, 1996). Currently, this form of intervention goes by multiple names: expressive writing (e.g., Smyth & Pennebaker, 2008), written emotional disclosure (e.g., Frisina, Borod, & Lepore, 2004), scriptotherapy (e.g., Riordan, 1996), and therapeutic writing (e.g., Wright &

Chung, 2001). Despite varied terminology, these terms all refer to the process of openly and emotionally writing about a personal experience, with little concern for grammatical accuracy.

Practitioners of the therapeutic model of writing base their ideas on enhancing physical and mental health and they operate on the premise that “writing about difficulties enables us to discover the wholeness of things, the connectedness of human experience” (DeSalvo, 2000, p. 43). Thus, writing about difficulties helps individuals process their emotions and make sense of their experiences. To put their pain into perspective through writing, traumatised individuals are able to relive their experiences and gain control over them through the power of language and cognitive processing. Sharon Bray, an American author and educator known for her work on therapeutic writing, suggests in her book *A Healing Journey: Writing Together Through Breast Cancer* (2004) that writing helps the writer to “re-create experience in a symbolic way” (p.14). Hence, empowering the writer to gain more control over the experience and reframing it in a more meaningful manner.

Trauma has been described as something that can deeply fracture our sense of self. Thus, healing from trauma often involves reclaiming our life narrative and identity. To do this, traumatic experiences and memories must be reworked into narrative form and incorporated into a coherent framework (Etherington, 2003). For those who have suffered trauma, rebuilding their worldview, rewriting, and reinterpreting their fragmented life story is crucial to regain a sense of meaning and continuity, despite the horror or senselessness of the traumatic event. Only through this process can they move forward with their lives. Without such integration, trauma remains as an unresolved, disruptive presence, one of those stories not yet told that disturbs one’s life narrative and sense of self (Abfalterer, 2011).

Louise DeSalvo, an American writer and professor, describes in her book *Writing as a Way of Healing* (2000) the concept of a healing narrative which centers on the idea that our sense of self is built upon the stories we construct about our lives. She writes:

We are the accumulation of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are...Through writing, we revisit our past and review and revise it. What we thought happened, what we believed happened to us, shifts and changes as we discover deeper and more complex truths. It isn't that we use our writing to deny what we've experienced. Rather, we use it to shift our perspective. (p.11)

In this context, the purpose of a healing narrative stands apart from that of a trauma narrative; rather than seeking to uncover buried memories or reconcile the unconscious with the conscious mind, it seeks to create a version of the story that feels truthful and resonant to the individual. This truth is shaped from the subject's own perspective, independent of any external narrative others might impose.

DeSalvo outlined the qualities of a healing narrative starting with how "A healing narrative renders our experience concretely, authentically, explicitly, and with a richness of detail" (p.57). For DeSalvo, a healing narrative captures our experiences in a way that is concrete, genuine, and rich in detail. It recounts events accurately and grounds them in specific moments and locations, providing a clear sense of when and where they occurred. The people involved are portrayed in a balanced and realistic manner, avoiding idealization or vilification, thus creating well-rounded characters. This narrative style reflects a unique and personal voice, one that is unmistakably our own and couldn't be mistaken for anyone else's. Even when addressing challenging topics, this approach emphasizes honesty and a deep individual perspective.

Another quality is how a healing narrative connects emotions to the events that prompted them, allowing us to convey both past and present feelings about these experiences. It offers a space to compare and contrast how our emotions have evolved over time, providing insight into changes or continuities in our emotional responses. If a moment of crisis or trauma

left us feeling numb, this narrative includes what that emptiness was like, capturing, for instance, the moment emotions began to emerge, if they eventually did, and exploring the significance of initially feeling nothing. This approach helps map the journey of feeling through stages of trauma and healing, DeSalvo noted that “A healing narrative links feelings to events” (p.59).

Furthermore, “A healing narrative is a balanced narrative. It uses negative words to describe emotions and feelings in moderation; but it uses positive words, too” (p.59). A healing narrative maintains balance by carefully weaving both negative and positive emotions into the storytelling. It’s essential to explore and express our difficult feelings, but equally vital to acknowledge any moments of joy, comfort, or peace. For example, if we describe parents or loved ones in wholly idealized terms, we may overlook complexities that add depth to our experiences. Similarly, if we portray ourselves as flawless, it’s worth examining if we’re omitting any personal flaws or missteps. Since negative emotions often surface more readily when we’re in distress, intentionally including positive memories helps create a fuller, more authentic narrative that captures the range of our lived experience. Revisiting only negative feelings can limit growth; looking for positive moments or lessons reveals resilience and personal change.

Finally, a healing narrative needs to tell the whole story in a way that’s both detailed and easy to follow. It should be clear enough that even someone unfamiliar with our experiences can fully understand it. This is crucial if survivors intend to publish their work, but it is also important for personal writing or sharing within a small group. By thoroughly putting our experiences on paper, we start to make sense of things that were previously confusing or hard to process, “A healing narrative reveals the insights we’ve achieved from our painful experiences” (p.60).

DeSalvo offers a similar perspective, drawing from D.H. Lawrence's line, "One sheds one's sickness in books – repeats and presents again one's emotions, to be master of them" (p.18). She examines how writing allows individuals to relive past experiences by re-presenting scenes as if they were unfolding in the present, which can potentially undo or mitigate the lingering effects of those early experiences. Through writing, the author can assume different perspectives, reframe timelines, and reconsider pivotal moments or symbols that may not initially fit into the current narrative. Writers understand that a polished piece comes only after multiple drafts; in the context of healing, this iterative process can reveal memories, insights, and thoughts that might otherwise remain hidden when striving to narrate a single truth of an experience.

Professor Marian MacCurdy extends this concept by highlighting the significance of images and emotions in the healing process. She explains that images are closely tied to memory, especially traumatic ones, which are physiologically intertwined with emotions, as they reside in the same brain region. When such images resurface, emotions naturally accompany them. This process is crucial because, as MacCurdy stated in his book *The Mind's Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma* (2007), "When we begin to put words to those images, we are using the parts of the brain that create narrative, and we begin to create a sense of control over those memories" (p.92). She explains that as these memories become part of one's consciousness, they can be accessed or restructured voluntarily, granting the individual agency over them. Initially, many students who attempt to write about traumatic events draw a blank. Through exercises that emphasize setting details, they can begin uncovering the stories that need expression. These details evolve into images, which in turn allow the writer to access and articulate what had been repressed. Scholars across fields agree that working through trauma involves metaphors, as the study of memory is fundamentally a study of metaphor. (MacCurdy, 2007).

In their Paper entitled *Confronting a Traumatic Event: Toward an Understanding of Inhibition and Disease* (1986), James Pennebaker and Sandra Beall conducted a study in which undergraduate students were divided into four groups. One group wrote about trivial topics, another wrote about their emotions surrounding a personal trauma, a third described a traumatic event without expressing feelings, and the fourth wrote about both the facts and their emotions related to a traumatic experience. Each group wrote over four consecutive evenings. The results showed that students who wrote about both the emotional and factual aspects of their trauma initially experienced higher blood pressure and more negative moods. However, over the next six months, this same group made fewer visits to the campus health center. As the authors noted, “writing about both the emotions and facts surrounding a traumatic event was associated with relatively higher blood pressure and negative moods following the essays, but fewer health center visits in the six months following the experiment” (p. 274).

These findings challenge the idea that simply venting emotions provides relief. As Pennebaker and Beall explained, their results “argue against a simple venting or discharge theory of catharsis” (p. 280). In a follow-up study entitled “Disclosure of traumas and immune function: Health implications for psychotherapy” (1988), Pennebaker and his fellow researchers explored the health effects of expressive writing even further. One group of students was asked to write for four consecutive days about their “deepest thoughts and feelings” ideally focusing on a personal event or experience they had not shared in detail with others (p. 240). The control group, by contrast, wrote about neutral, non-traumatic topics over the same period. The results were telling. Students who wrote about personal traumatic experiences showed better outcomes in two measures of cellular immune function and made fewer visits to the university health center compared to the control group. Notably, the researchers found that “the individuals who showed the greatest health improvements were those who wrote about topics that they had actively held back from telling others” (p. 244).

5.The Therapeutic Effect of Sharing Stories

Sharing emotion with others serves an essential therapeutic function. Through the act of self-disclosure, people gain “insight into our own thoughts and feelings” (Pennebaker, 2016, p.144), which helps them to anticipate stressful situations, recognize them before they escalate and to become more adaptive to how they experience them. Inhibition or unwilling to share, on the other hand, act as the “cumulative stressors on the body, increasing the probability of illness and other stress-related physical and psychological problems” (Pennebaker, 1990, p.21). The positive impact of verbal or written sharing involves actively gaining insight into our feelings, making us more self-aware, deeming the experience to be more meaningful and subsequently improving our health as Pennebaker (2016) noted,

When we talk a great deal in a group, we claim that we enjoy it and learn from it. After confessing a crime, our minds and bodies appear to be relaxed. Once we understand the link between a psychological event and a recurring health problem, our health improves. (p.10)

One explanation for how effective writing can be for trauma survivors is that it helps them to convert images and emotions into words and thus changing the ways a person thinks and approaches a traumatic memory. When thoughts and emotions are brought together, it becomes easier for the individual to shape a clear and cohesive account of the experience. Once the experience is put into a narrative form, it can be stored and assimilated, thereby reducing the distress associated with the traumatic experience. This mental processing helps individuals reduce the stress level associated with the experience through changes in the frequency of the intrusive thoughts associated with the trauma (Greenberg, 1995).

Writing about traumatic experiences serves two important functions: it helps to organize the traumatic experience into a coherent narrative form and thereby challenging the disorganized nature of traumatic memory. Second, it challenges the very nature of traumatic

memory that resists and defies being incorporated into a narrative form, whether verbally or in a written form. This process of writing ultimately reduces the stress levels victims experience as they remember their traumas which usually takes the form of nightmares and hallucinations. According to Smyth et al. (2001),

Emotional writing about traumatic or stressful events may be beneficial because it is effective at forcing the re-coding of the traumatic memory into narrative language. Although this theoretical explanation that writing produces a restructuring of memories through narrative formation seems plausible, it needs to be explored in the context of writing about traumatic experiences. (p.162)

This observation highlights the transformative potential of writing, as it allows traumatic memories to shift from fragmented and intrusive recollections into structured narratives, thereby enabling individuals to gain greater cognitive and emotional control over their experiences. Writing facilitates cognitive development and enhances emotional clarity. It can lead to significant insights regarding self-identity, personal agency, and existential purpose. By expressing traumatic experiences in words, individuals take part in symbolic processing that encourages psychological distancing and re-evaluation. Writing promotes the process of meaning-making, which is the process of understanding life events and fitting them into a clear idea of oneself, is not just a psychological result but also a healing mechanism that helps promote post-traumatic growth. By giving voice to their trauma, individuals can reshape their experiences, thus facilitating post-traumatic growth. This transformative power of writing highlights its essential role in therapeutic practices and self-care, encouraging more individuals to embrace writing as a tool for processing and healing (Park et al., 2016).

6. Literature Review

In terms of examining trauma and recovery in literary studies, the literature surrounding some of Colleen Hoover's novels has been predominantly directed towards analyzing traumatic injury and painful past with disregard to art or writing as two convenient and unique approaches to traumatic representation and healing. The role of art and writing in facilitating growth has not been sufficiently addressed, leaving a gap in the literary examination of the diverged and unique methods for rehabilitation and psychological recovery. Only one academic research paper has been found with the title "Bakhtinian Study of *Maybe Someday* and *Confess*" by Anam Tariq and Ayesha Abid. This paper draws on the observation of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic, and offers a dialogic reading grounded in Bakhtin's concepts (dialogism, carnivalesque, art as "answerability") and explicitly argues that Hoover integrates visual and musical art to shape character development and sentiment. However, the analysis remains literary-theoretical, focusing on the structural and philosophical aspects of art as discourse rather than its psychological or therapeutic dimensions, and does not engage with trauma theory, art therapy, or psychology. The concept of "therapeutic" is used metaphorically as healing through communication not through clinically grounded mechanisms like externalization, catharsis, or emotional regulation and although the Bakhtinian study recognizes the dialogic and redemptive role of art in her novel *Confess*, it does not investigate how artistic expression facilitates psychological recovery or trauma processing.

The existing literature surrounding Hoover's works, despite being insightful and significantly informative, has been constrained and limited in considering alternative approaches to traumatic representation and healing. In their study, "The Portrayal of Fear and Trauma as Roadblocks to Love in *Ugly Love*", Danu Wahyono and Risma Kartika Dewi employ a descriptive qualitative literary-psychological reading to examine the manifestations of fear and trauma within the novel. This psychological reading of *Ugly Love* examines causes,

symptoms, and coping in Miles' trauma and concludes that by facing one's past and voicing their pain, a psychological transformation emerges. Ghada Ali Mohamed, an Egyptian researcher, has written an academic paper published in (2024) entitled "Gender-Based Violence, Trauma, and Strategies for Coping in Colleen Hoover's Novel *It Ends with Us*". The researcher focuses on script therapy to highlight the therapeutic power of writing in helping Lily, the main protagonist of this novel, to cope with her trauma and experiences of gendered violence which she endured by her father and husband. The study is well conducted and similarly insightful, yet it did not provide an exhaustive conceptual analysis of therapeutic writing and was primarily focused on childhood abuse.

Hoover's novel *It Ends with Us* has been attracting the dominating academic research endeavors with many papers and theses published articulating the different shapes of traumatic effects and mainly concentrating on trauma while rarely tackling traumatic recovery in other novels by her. For instance, in a journal article entitled "The Interplay of Trauma in Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us*: A Psychoanalytic Exploration through Sigmund Freud's Theories", the authors Hildegard Chantika Dapawole and Restu Arini explored the trauma experienced by Lily and examined its impact on her behavior and social interactions using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as well as neuroses, repression and the compulsion to repeat. These different academic productions have been insightful; however, they remain rather monolithic in their inspection.

The contribution of this study lies in examining and understanding the multilayers of traumatic recovery that underscore the journey of reconciliation and healing from atrocities. The silence that predominantly underscores the core of traumatic experiences is shattered by incorporating different means of disclosure that blend together to rewrite the dominant problem-saturated narrative into one that is driven by resilience and empowerment. In Colleen Hoover's novels *Confess* (2015), *Verity* (2018), and *Slammed* (2012), therapeutic art, written

and oral confession, and theatrical poetics emerge as means of connecting with others and as resources for belonging to an empathetic and embracing community.

In terms of structure, this thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One examines the historical traces of the term catharsis, whether in religion or psychotherapy, and the power of narrative, mainly writing, in reauthoring the dominant, problem-oriented traumatic narrative and its relation to memory. It also examines the complex relationship between language and memory in the context of trauma disclosure and the difficulties trauma victims face in verbalising the multifaceted and painful experiences of trauma. Writing is viewed as a fundamental approach used to narrate and share the painful experiences of trauma victims and as a means to connect with empathetic others.

Chapter two, entitled “From Silence to Expression in *Confess* (2015): The Therapeutic Power of Confession and Art” is a practical examination of the roles of art and writing as two modalities of recovery and expression. This chapter traces the lives of Owen and Auburn, two characters overwhelmed by trauma and loss. It follows the life of Auburn, a young woman burdened by the loss of her lover Adam during her teenage years, the loss of a son she struggles to obtain custody of, and a world where she no longer finds purpose or companionship. Similarly, Owen is a troubled artist who fails to cope with the death of his family and holds himself accountable for it. As fate brings Auburn and Owen together, art and writing emerge as two modalities for representing their inner turmoil and as bridges to reconnect them in a world of aesthetic artistry that both celebrates hardships and admires resilience.

Chapter three, entitled “Writing as Therapy in *Verity* (2018)” explores a different form of writing, autobiography, as a distinct and creative form of expressing the multifaceted dimensions of traumatic experiences and the path to reconciliation. This chapter traces the life of Lowen Ashleigh, a struggling author with a troubled personality and an unclear sense of purpose, as she moves to the Crawford residence to coauthor the series of novels that the

renowned novelist Verity Crawford was unable to finish due to a car accident and the psychological transformation that both Verity and Lowen undergo. Verity turns to autobiographical writing, which proves therapeutic over time and emotionally cleansing. This chapter presents two different sides of traumatic experience. One is that of a mother who lost her children but refused to be overwhelmed by her feelings and subsequently turned to writing as a means to cope with her daughter's loss. The second is that of a woman who fails to reauthor her life narrative and alter her dominant story, leading her to decline into violence and trauma.

Chapter four, entitled "Slam Poetry as a Mechanism of Trauma Disclosure in Hoover's *Slammed* (2012)" explores theatrical and personal poetry creation as a means to overcome the fear and anxiety surrounding the sharing of traumatic pasts. This chapter follows the life of Lake Cohen, an eighteen-year-old teenager who is haunted by the death of her father, and Will Cooper, her English teacher at school, who has similarly lost most of his family in a car accident. Will turns to poetry as a medium for coping with and transcending the painful consequences of loss. His teachings and insights regarding poetry and the power of words to represent one's inner turmoil, pain, and triumphs prove to be both insightful and therapeutic for Laken, who longs for love and reintegration into an embracing society. This chapter endorses the stages of recovery that Judith Herman mentioned in her book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (2015) and applies them throughout Laken's and Will's experiences in order to demonstrate the promising potential of trauma disclosure, mainly writing, in processing emotional oscillation and initiating recovery.

Chapter Two

From Silence to Expression in *Confess* (2015): The Therapeutic Power of Confession and Art

Colleen Hoover is a contemporary American novelist best known for her emotionally charged works which blend psychological depth and suspense. Hoover primarily writes novels in the romance and young adult fiction genres, yet some of her novels explore themes of trauma, grief, and healing. Many of her stories revolve around characters who struggle with their past, a past shaped by loss, abuse and conflict. By weaving elements of psychological tension mixed with thrilling portrayals of emotional pain, Hoover's creative creation not only captivates readers with the intensity of emotional display but rather illuminates the complex emotional aspect of trauma and recovery and sheds light on the power of confession and emotional cleansing which accompanies trauma and healing. Among her most notable publications concerning trauma are *Hopeless* (2012), *Losing Hope* (2013), *It Ends with Us* (2016), *Verity* (2018) and *Confess* (2015). In 2022, Hoover held six of the top ten spots on the *New York Times* paperback fiction bestseller list. She has won numerous awards for her writing, including the Goodreads Choice Award for Best Romance in 2014 and the National Indie Excellence Book Award for Best Young Adult Fiction in 2019.

Colleen Hoover's book *Confess* (2015) delves into the intertwined journeys of Auburn Reed and Owen Gentry, as the two navigate through grief and guilt. The story beautifully demonstrates how the act of storytelling with its different forms of expression, whether art or written confessions, serves as a means to share parts of the self which past traumas otherwise bury and leave to consume one's psychological well-being and fulfilment. Auburn's trauma begins with the death of her first love, Adam, during her teenage years. In a hospital room and at the age of fifteen, Auburn is grieving the impending loss of her first love expressing, "I bury

my face into his neck, searching for his warmth, but I can't find it. He's cold today" (Hoover, 2015, p.4). Physically and emotionally, Auburn feels stripped away from her connection with Adam, marking the first of many breakdowns she will endure. Auburn expresses, as she embraces him, "but my panic is setting in, burying itself in my soul and making it hard to think. The sadness feels like warmth creeping its way up my chest, creating an insurmountable pressure the closer it gets to my heart" (p.8).

In an act of disregard for her feelings, Lydia, Adam's mother, adds yet another layer to Auburn's grief telling her, "You're fifteen, Auburn. You think what you feel for him is real, but you'll be over him in a month" (p.5). These words invalidate Auburn's grief, leaving her with a sense of powerlessness and isolation that lingers into adulthood. Francis Weller, an American psychotherapist, writer and soul activist, highlights in his book *The Wild Edge of Sorrow Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief* (2015) the importance of grief and emotional distress over loss as a basic human need and warns of its denial suggesting that

Grief becomes problematic when the conditions needed to help us work with grief are absent. For example, when we are forced to carry our sorrow in isolation, or when the time needed to fully metabolize the nutrients of a particular loss is denied, and we are pressured to return to "normal" too soon. We are told to "get on with it" and "get over it." The lack of courtesy and compassion surrounding grief is astonishing, reflecting an underlying fear and mistrust of this basic human experience. (p.18)

Auburn's grief over Adam haunts her throughout the novel as she processes and compares her future life and encounters that of Owen's, a passionate artist whom she befriends and later falls in love with, leaving her questioning her own self-worth as a mother and as a balanced human being. Her grief is the root of her trauma, as it becomes problematic and

psychologically impairing, isolating her from the world around her. The loss of an intimate attachment relationship through death even when the death is non-traumatic by objective criteria, poses profound challenges to our adaptation as living beings. In part as an expression of an evolutionary heritage shared with other social animals, victims respond to such separation with a suite of seemingly hardwired reactions, including weeping, behavioural disorientation, and yearning for the lost attachment figure.

In *Grief and Bereavement: What Psychiatrists Need to Know* (2009), Katherine Shear and Sidney Zisook noted that “Complicated grief, sometimes referred to as unresolved or traumatic grief, is the current designation for a syndrome of prolonged and intense grief that is associated with substantial impairment in work, health, and social functioning” (p.67-69). They added that “Symptoms include separation distress (recurrent pangs of painful emotions, with intense yearning and longing for the deceased, and preoccupation with thoughts of the loved one) and traumatic distress (sense of disbelief regarding the death, anger and bitterness, distressing, intrusive thoughts related to the death” (p.67-69).

When Adam urges Auburn to disclose something she has never revealed to anyone, she hesitates but eventually confesses, revealing a deeply personal secret she had kept hidden. Her admission reflects her vulnerability, as she opens up about a part of her life and feelings she had never dared to share with anyone else: “I think about all the people I wish could die instead of you. ... I get really far. Sometimes I say every name I know, so I start saying names of people I’ve never met in person before. I even make up names sometimes” (Hoover, 2015, p.9). Faced with Adam’s impending death, she clings to denial, unable to accept that the man she loved so deeply is slipping beyond her reach, leaving her traumatized by the incident. Moreover, this reaction grows deep inside her for years, keeping her in a state of prolonged grief disorder characterized by the symptoms previously mentioned. Adam later expresses what seems to be a mutual sense of concern regarding their resentment for both, their parents for

taking control of their decisions, how they should process their relationship and, above all, death for claiming Adam's life. Adam tells her:

I want to thank you, Auburn... for so many things I want to thank you for being just as pissed off as I am... I'm referring specifically to how we're both so pissed at Death for being such a greedy bastard. But I guess I'm also referring to our parents, for not understanding this. (p.6)

Four years later, as Auburn moves to Dallas, a place where she feels alienated to protect and be around the one thing that keeps her emotionally alive, namely her son A.J., she grows ever more doubtful and concerned, preoccupied with feelings of worthlessness. She contemplates her inner struggle reflecting, "It's the thirteenth time I've walked home in my new state, in a city inhabited by nothing but strangers, but I'm determined to make it the first time I'm not crying when I reach my front door." (p.13). Auburn adds, "My neighbors probably think I'm psychotic. It's just such a long walk from work to home, and long walks make me contemplate my life, and my life makes me cry" (p.13).

The act of walking home, for Auburn, goes way beyond physical space, rather it is an emotional journey of self-reflection which ends in tears and self-loathing that ultimately shatters her own self-image, revealing her vulnerability and loneliness in a new city where she feels judged. According to Judith Herman (2015), a leading expert on trauma and psychiatry, "Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose trust in themselves, in others... Their self-esteem is deeply affected by experiences of humiliation, guilt, and helplessness" (p.56).

Critically, loneliness may also lead to and flow from changes to an individual's cognitions about themselves and others. Lonely people are more likely to perceive themselves as inferior, worthless, unattractive, socially incompetent, worthy of shame, and unlovable; they

are also unable to see others as trustworthy. One can easily imagine how loneliness can thus create a self-reinforcing downward spiral in which a person feels both too unworthy to be fully seen and distrustful that others, partners, network members, or system actors could possibly see them in their full humanity. This damaging combination may reinforce the experience of profound loneliness, undermining one's ability to seek help. (Brown, 2008)

In his psychoanalytic article *Psychic Trauma and Traumatic Object Loss* (2003), the American psychoanalyst Harold P. Blum suggested that "The effects of psychic trauma influence the way one perceives and reacts to external reality. It is stressful and confusing to live in two unintegrated worlds, before and after sudden object loss" (p.415). He further added, "In traumatic bereavement the object relationship before the trauma no longer exists. The world in which the patient finds him- or herself, and helps to shape after the traumatic loss, is significantly different" (p.415). For Auburn, the collision of two unintegrated worlds represents the past traumatic loss of Adam, which she is burdened with internally and longing for an attachment in a new external world, that is a new city.

Auburn portrays herself as a young woman who consistently defines her identity through the hardships and remorse she has endured, rather than by her strengths or aspirations. This self-perception implies a feeling of powerlessness and acceptance. The sensation of numbness often coincides with such feelings of powerlessness, as individuals become so overwhelmed by their situation that they retreat into a state of emotional detachment. Auburn admittedly remarks, "I pause and look into the glass window of one of the buildings to check for smeared mascara. I take in my reflection and don't like what I see" (Hoover, 2015, p.13). She adds, "A girl who hates the choices she's made in her life. A girl who hates her career. A girl who misses Portland. A girl who desperately needs a second job" (p.13).

For the broken Auburn, self-loathing and depressive thoughts stem from her feelings of loneliness and lack of connection that she experiences in the absence of a family or a friend in

a city where she feels nothing but despise for her life's course of actions as she begins to hate her own reflection. As social animals, human beings' drive to establish a healthy bond or connection underscores the very natural progression of our personal development and growth, however, a failure to establish such a connection undermines our self-image. As Herman explicitly states "A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self" (p.52).

Another equal aspect that has been driving the direction of Auburn's psychological stress is her son, A.J, who serves as a continual reminder of the bond she previously had, and arguably still has, with his deceased father. Lydia, Adam's dominating mother, has taken advantage of Auburn's inexperience and the fact that Auburn could not be in charge of A.J at such a young age and, as a result, had the upper hand in A. J's custody for many years, making her relationship with Auburn fraught with conflict. Auburn tells Owen, "The only option I have, really, is to do whatever I can to appease her, all the while saving every extra penny I can to pay the lawyer I've hired to help me. But even he doesn't seem hopeful" (Hoover, 2015, p.155-156). Lydia leverages her financial stability and legal authority to manipulate Auburn, leaving her in a constant state of fear, preventing her from claiming her autonomy and keeping her in a state of submission. Auburn tells Owen, "I thought she wanted to help, but now I realize she's using AJ to replace the son she lost" (p.155).

Such submission and control over Auburn by Lydia align with Sandra L. Bloom's (2009), an associate professor and a board-certified psychiatrist, assertion that helplessness can be critical in trauma dynamics and survival by affirming that

Human beings deplore being helpless. Placed into situations of helplessness, we will do anything to escape and restore a sense of mastery. But helplessness is a hallmark characteristic of a traumatic

experience.... [R]epetitive exposure to helplessness is so toxic to emotional and physiological stability that in service of continued survival, survivors are compelled to adapt to hopelessness itself, a phenomenon that has been termed “learned helplessness”. (p.151)

Auburn expresses such sentiment during her time in Portland, and although Lydia retained ultimate authority over all matters concerning AJ, Auburn still perceived herself as his mother. Yet, what made Auburn feel unattached from her son is the way Lydia treated her in Dallas. Auburn feels that Lydia has been trying to separate her from her son, claiming him for herself, the thing which leaves Auburn in a state of tears, adding more weight to her struggle to win her son back and making her question her role as a good and caring mother. Auburn remarks,

However, since she took him and moved to Dallas several months ago, I’ve felt like the worst mother in the world. I never get to see him. Every time I talk to him on the phone, I’m in tears by the time I hang up. I can’t help but feel like the distance she’s putting between us is intentional. (Hoover, 2015, p.178)

Owen’s trauma, while different in nature, similarly isolates him emotionally. Owen suffers from past trauma, one which he feels responsible for. At the age of sixteen, Owen was driving his family including his father, mother and older brother, and despite being constantly reminded by his brother to keep both hands on the steering wheel and other directions, Owen admits being new to driving and wishes if they had given him the one direction which would have mattered the most for their survival: “I was completely new at driving, and every single direction that came out of their mouths reminded me of that. All but the one direction I wished they had given me the most. “Watch out for drunk drivers.” (p. 296).

Despite the fact that Owen expresses a guilt-free emotional discharge to Auburn remarking, “It’s not something I dwell on. The wreck wasn’t my fault. Of course I miss them, and it hurts every day, but I also know that life has to go on. And my mother and Carey weren’t the type of people who would want me to use their deaths as an excuse” (p.150). However, it appears that Owen experiences a conflicting struggle with the accident, one which leaves him unconsciously scared and emotionally troubled, constituting a case of trauma. Owen admittedly expresses,

The wreck wasn’t my fault, but had I been more experienced, I would have known to look left and right first, even though the light gave me permission to move forward. My brother and mother died on impact. My father remains in critical condition. I’ve been broken since the moment it happened. I spend the majority of my days and nights here, and the longer I sit, waiting for him to wake up, the lonelier it becomes. (p.296-297)

Even though the accident may not fully provide a sense of a guilt-free pass for Owen, and despite the fact that the accident, by objective criteria, was not entirely his fault, the subsequent symptoms remain significant. These symptoms include ruminations and the failure to establish healthy relationships with others, particularly with his father and ex-girlfriend. Additionally, he experiences feelings of emptiness, loneliness, and unfulfillment following the accident. Moreover, he fails to consider other alternatives that might have prevented the accident in the first place. All these factors serve as components of post-traumatic stress disorder, of which he is a victim.

Owen’s feelings following the accident do not parallel the way his mind thinks, for he feels a hole in his heart, one which he cannot fill with reasoning. What Owen suffers from is a head-heart lag, or what is known to be a rational emotional dissociation, whereby the individual

can see the logic and rationality of an explanation for their survival but does not feel the corresponding emotions. According to the psychologist Richard Stott (2007), rational emotional disassociation:

occurs when an individual concurrently holds two ideas in conscious awareness. One is of the form “I believe X rationally” and the second is “It feels as if X is false.” Both ideas are afforded strong or total conviction, and X is any propositional statement. (p.38)

Owen articulates much of that guilt which he feels during a conversation with Auburn, expressing, while making a tight fist with his hand against his chest, “Sometimes I miss them so much, it hurts me right here... It feels like someone is squeezing my heart with the strength of the entire goddamn world” (Hoover, 2015, p.151). Owen’s description of this pain suggests the intrusive return of traumatic memory, as his grief is experienced not as a distant recollection but as a recurring re-enactment of the original psychic injury, repeatedly forcing him to relive the emotional impact of the loss. Compounding this burden is the deterioration of his father’s mental and physical health, along with his reliance on medication. This dependency eventually evolves into drug addiction and a harmful habit that jeopardizes his legal career. His father’s substance abuse stems from his attempt to cope with the grief of losing his wife and eldest son.

Owen recounts his father’s state at the hospital following the accident and the troubling thought of having his father suffer because of him. His father “was in a lot of pain, physically and emotionally... they had him doped up on meds. When he finally woke up and began to recover, the pills were the only things to relieve his pain” (p.215). Such an account by Owen underscores the immense weight of loss and sadness his father felt and his desperate search for an escape to dull his emotions that eventually resulted in a long-lasting trauma for Callahan Gentry, Owen’s father. Owen further adds, “At the time, I didn’t think my father was capable of allowing something as small as a pill to completely devour him, but I was naïve” (p.215).

In his book *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* (2010), Gabor Maté, known for his extensive work on the link between trauma, addiction, and mental health, asserts that “Addictions always originate in pain, whether felt openly or hidden in the unconscious. They are emotional aesthetics” (p.49). Maté further adds, “Far more than a quest for pleasure, chronic substance use is the addict’s attempt to escape distress. From a medical point of view, addicts are self-medicating conditions like depression...post-traumatic stress” (p.49). Consequently, Callahan’s addiction does not merely separate him emotionally from the accident, rather more tragically, from his last surviving son as well.

Notably, Colleen Hoover captures the dreadful consequences of addiction and its aftermath and traces its withdrawal to an attempt to escape a pitiful reality, during a conversation between Auburn and Owen. In that conversation, Auburn questions the reason behind people’s addictions and the horrible feeling of hangover in the next day, after being stood out by Owen in a bar and being hangover herself, “Why in the world do people drink if it makes them feel like this the next day?” (Hoover, 2015, p.119). Owen responds, “It’s an escape,” (p.119). She further exclaims, “I get that, but is escaping for a few hours really worth the hangover the next day?” (p.120). Owen responds, “I guess that would depend on the reality you’re trying to escape” (p.120).

The vicious cycle of drug or alcohol addiction serves, for many individuals, a defence mechanism against the atrocities they face and the brain’s biological adaptation to fence off the subsequent emotional pain which can be, otherwise, traumatising. However, such means quickly turn into a sickness and separate one from those close to them. Colleen Hoover thoughtfully reflects through Auburn:

You drink to escape the emotional pain you’re in, and then the next day you do it all over again to get rid of the physical pain. So you drink more and you drink more often and pretty soon you’re drunk

all the time and it becomes just as bad, if not worse, than the reality you were attempting to escape from in the first place. Only now, you need an escape from the escape, so you find something even stronger than the alcohol. And maybe that's what turns alcoholics into addicts. (p.120)

Ironically, the same need to escape from the escape which Auburn expresses early in the novel may in fact be the same kind of escape the traumatized Owen has experienced. As a grieving and bereaved son, Owen's continuous attempt to provide illegal medications for his father is an attempt to escape the harsh reality of taking accountability and feeling rejected by his father for the accident. However, one lie, or one escape, soon turns to many and it becomes abundantly clear that the more Owen fights the moving sands of taking responsibility or facing his father, the more he sinks into a cycle of self-hate and regression.

What reinforces Owen's guilt and self-blame is him having to prioritize his father's needs before his own to cope with overwhelming emotions, as he had to lie and fake having back pains to ensure providing medical prescriptions which were used to ease his father's emotional decline. However, such an attitude of a seemingly caregiving gesture has been too much for a sixteen-year-old teenager to take in and justify, leaving him haunted by the memories and his actions. Owen recounts having to endure a lot of guilt to rectify what happened, moreover, he feels that

it's hard not to feel guilt when you're a sixteen-year-old kid. I just wanted to make it better for him. It began with my being prescribed my own pain medication. It was fairly easy to fake back pain after a wreck of our magnitude, so that's exactly what I did. After several months of his continuously being in more and more pain, it got to the point where even my additional pills weren't enough for him. (p.216)

Owen witnesses the destruction of his father's spirit, adding another layer to his trauma. He feels responsible not only for the accident but also for his father's subsequent emotional devastation. He states, "And when I had to tell him that my mother and Carey were dead, I saw it. I saw the life seep right out of his eyes. And I haven't seen it return since the night it happened" (p.150). However, this act of compassion, gradually and inevitably, becomes a morbid pathological condition for his father's future wellbeing and even for Owen himself. In their book *Pathological Altruism* (2012), Oakley et al. argued that "Pathological altruism might be thought of as any behavior or personal tendency in which either the stated aim or the implied motivation is to promote the welfare of another or others" (p.4). They added, "But, instead of overall beneficial outcomes, the "altruism" instead has irrational and substantial negative consequences to the other or even to the self. (p.4)

Therefore, Owen's emotional guilt over the accident is fundamentally a tragic flaw that haunts him for years with intrusive memories which he cannot dismiss. For many trauma survivors, being haunted by memories and guilt, if not addressed or assimilated, hinders their emotional progression following a tragic accident like Owen's, entrapping them in a cycle of endless traumatic reliving of the experience. According to the American psychologist Richard J. McNally (2005), "For people with posttraumatic stress disorder, remembering trauma feels like reliving it. Traumatic events from the past are recalled with such vividness and emotional intensity that it seems as if the trauma were happening all over again" (p.105).

Similarly to Auburn, Owen feels immensely troubled by his sense of helplessness as he watches his father's self-destruction for years. Owen's later narrative highlights a compelling depiction of the interplay between addiction, trauma, and familial relationships, "As much as I've tried to talk my father into rehab, he's afraid of what would happen to his career if he went and it were to become public knowledge" (Hoover, 2015, p.217). In attempting to persuade his father into considering rehab, Owen assumes a parental role in his relation to his father,

reversing the dynamics of a natural parental relationship. Owen's narrative highlights the impact of addiction not only on the addict but also on their loved ones.

Stigma and shame emerge as two barriers to addressing trauma. His father's reluctance to consider rehab perpetuates a cycle of fear and denial driving him away from getting the help he needs. Arguably, Owen considers such an attitude an act of selfishness, for he no longer sees the magnitude to which his father's refusal is justified. Owen expresses vividly that, "I know that addictions don't just get better. They're either actively fought or actively fed. And right now, he's not doing a goddamn thing to fight his" (p.217). Owen feels frustrated as his father's inaction leads to little hope in improvement since he thinks that "It's just a matter of time, because alcohol is beginning to play a large role and the incidents I've been rescuing him from this past year are becoming more and more frequent" (p.217).

Years later, Owen receives a phone call from his father asking him for help. Owen assumes parental responsibility and is forced to abandon his date with Auburn. Owen's attempt to find connection and love is quickly shaken by his need to protect his father and his fear of losing him. Marked by a promising start, Owen's date with Auburn transforms into a crucial moment in their relationship due to an unexpected phone call as Owen narrates, "Things were going so well between us just now and the second I get a phone call from my father, I shut down and make it look like the exact opposite of what it is" (p.187). This encounter plants seeds of doubt and confusion in Auburn's mind about Owen's priorities and reliability.

Owen's frustration grows deeper and thicker over the years as he constantly feels ashamed of his father's constant lies of improving, and his later narrative reveals a genuine concern over the well-being of his father, whereas his father's addiction is progressively destructive to the point where it would almost feel impossible to hide. Owen reveals:

In the past year alone, this is the third time I've had to come to his rescue. It used to not be so bad when it was just the pain pills, but

now that he's mixing them with alcohol, it's harder for him to hide it from everyone else. (p.190)

As Owen drives his drunk father home, his narrative of that night highlights how trauma and the failure to address or express one's emotional trauma is a form of prolonged stress disorder which only entraps individuals in a web of emotional distortion and hinders psychological growth. As they drive, Owen's father makes an apology uttering the words "'I'm so sorry, Owen," he chokes out. "I tried. I tried, I tried, I tried." (p.191). Yet, his apology underlines how years of suppressed emotions leave both, whether Owen or Callahan, troubled with withdrawal. For Owen, not willing to confront or disclose his feelings to his father regarding the accident, and his father's withdrawal to establish a healthy connection with Owen, serve to entrap the two in a cycle of avoidance.

For both Owen and his father, the psychological need and human tendency to find solace and strength in each other's bonds, to seek empathy, or to process one's trauma through the art of confession and acceptance falls short, weakening their familial bond and leaving them feeling disconnected and ashamed. They both exhibit an inhibitive behaviour which entraps them in a vicious cycle of helplessness and sadness, given the fact that they both lack the ingredients of a healthy disclosure regarding the accident and its accompanying emotional responses, which, if had it been fully expressed, the cathartic emotional responses would have been integrated into growth and acceptance.

According to Pennebaker and Beall (1986), "Our own views assume that to inhibit one's behavior requires physiological work. To not talk about or otherwise confront major upheavals that have occurred in one's life is viewed as a form of inhibition" (p.275). They further added, "Actively inhibiting one's behavior, thoughts, and/or feelings over time places cumulative stress on the body and thus increases the probability of stress-related diseases" (p.275).

Narrative expression, whether through confession, writing or art, emerges as a central theme in *Confess*. Owen's studio becomes a symbolic dome where people's anonyms written confessions, resilience and vulnerabilities are turned into artistic paintings. What is generally perceived as weakness and helplessness for trauma survivors in the outer world becomes a work of art and aesthetic space for illustrating human empathy and connectedness within that inner physical space. The emotional scars and pains of trauma survivors become a work of art to be displayed in public and admired for their beauty. Owen's paintings serve as visual representations of emotions that defy verbal expression.

Colleen Hoover uses art to weave her plot. Through art, one can express themselves and find a path to deal with their inner turmoil. These confessions represent a dialogue, a silent exchange between Owen and the confessors. The confessions range from innocent, too profound and to ones which Owen remarks, "The confessions I never want to read again" (Hoover, 2015, p.68). For many trauma survivors, the act of narration or disclosure remains a challenge, and in the absence of any kind of representation, their inner turmoil becomes a pathological condition which separates them socially. However, art and writing serve as mediums for voicing out the unspeakable and a way to sync with others whose lives are similarly affected by the calamity of trauma.

According to Van der Kolk (2014), "Many traumatized people find themselves chronically out of sync with the people around them... Focusing on a shared history of trauma and victimization alleviates their searing sense of isolation... Members can belong only if they conform to the common code" (p.79-80). For the traumatized people in this novel, that common code is one of artistic expression and written representation which Owen creatively pours on canvas.

According to Cathy A. Malchiodi (2021), whose work significantly contributes to trauma-informed expressive arts therapy, "being able to communicate what has happened...

allows for emotions, events, and memories to be witnessed by others and is the powerful step in addressing the needs of any trauma survivor” (p.xvi). Artistic expression allows individuals to share a part of their inner world with the viewer without needing to rely on words. For Owen and Auburn, whose pain and trauma have not yet found a verbal representation, art becomes a visual, aesthetic and illustrative medium to connect with others, and particularly between and the two main characters in the novel.

Due to their mutual appreciation of art, Auburn and Owen form a dialogic connection after Auburn’s first visit to Adam in his studio in need of a job. Hoover’s use of art to tell stories is seen as a dialogic device. This enhances the narrative structure by combining multiple voices and points of view. In this novel, art serves as a vital conversation starter and helps the characters to bridge the gap between their past and future, while the characters themselves rest in the center. Since art gives emotions a physical form, an artist’s internal condition can be externalized using various artistic forms as a release.

Inspired by the book *Psychological Trauma* (1987) by Bessel van der Kolk, Dalia Avrahami, an art therapist known for her research in expressive art therapy, suggested in her work *Visual Art Therapy’s Unique Contribution in the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders* that expressive modalities such as art are a unique approach for treating traumatized patients with PTSD. She contended that such modality,

allows the trauma to “speak” in its own language—the visual form. It enables the client to contain the boundless chaos of the trauma within the borders of a concrete art product, relate the trauma’s story without verbalizing, and undergo a process of integration. (p.6).

Notably, Auburn expresses, for the first time in four years, yearning and admiration for something and someone other than Adam and that is her fascination with Owen and his art. She notes, as she takes a tour in the studio and while seeing a painting of a woman, and growing

more aware of the talent behind the brush, “It’s somehow sad and breathtaking and beautiful all at once. The painting is of a woman who seems to encompass both love and shame and every single emotion in between” (Hoover, 2015, p.25). She goes on to read the confession adhered to the wall next to a painting, “Sometimes I wonder if being dead would be easier than being his mother” (p.26). Hence, one cannot help but notice how these pieces of art validate Auburn repressed feelings of motherhood and insecurities which made her feel less of a mother than she hoped to be for A.J.

Art and writing are two components that are skillfully interwoven by Hoover to create a narrative structure, one that defies the loss of language and communal silence, and which fractures the very core of traumatic experience. In their respective work *Narrating Our Healing: Perspectives on Working Through Trauma* (2009), Gobodo-Madikizela, a south African professor of social science and a researcher in transgenerational trauma, and Chris van der Merwe, a literary scholar and professor, highlighted that “The essence of psychological trauma is loss: loss of language, meaning, order, and sense of continuity. Trauma is a shattering of the basic organising principles necessary to construct meaningful narratives about ourselves, others, and our environment” (p.39).

Yet, according to DeSalvo, “writing permits the construction of a cohesive, elaborate, thoughtful personal narrative in the way that simply speaking about our experiences doesn’t” (p.41). She further contends, “Through writing, suffering can be transmuted into art. And writing permits us to use our writing as a form of public testimony in a way that the private act of therapy doesn’t” (p.41). Hence, for the two leading protagonists of this novel, and even for the people who do vent off their traumas on paper, writing and art form a public testimony which challenges the core of a lost language of traumatic representation.

Upon walking to the confession window and while seeing a confession written in red ink and highlighted, “I’m scared I’ll never stop comparing my life without him to how my life

was when I was with him” (Hoover, 2015, p.27), Auburn reflects, “I’m not sure if I’m more fascinated by the confessions, the art, or the fact that I feel like I can relate to everything in here” (p.27). She goes on to explain that she rarely shares her thoughts and how a closed-off person she is regardless of how helpful it might be for her, nonetheless, she makes a statement which reinforces the need for trauma survivors to find connection as she expresses, “Seeing all of these secrets and knowing that these people have more than likely never shared these with anyone, and never will, makes me feel a sense of connection to them. A sense of belonging” (p.27-28).

For Auburn, Owen’s art becomes a mirror for her own journey. Engaging with the confessions and paintings allows her to confront her grief and rediscover her voice. This interplay between personal and collective storytelling illustrates the multifaceted nature of narrative healing, where different forms of expression complement one another. Seeing these confessions drives her to meditate, “In a way, the studio and the confessions remind me of Adam” (p.28). She fears, “I hate how I always tie Adam in to everything I see and do, and I wonder if and when that will ever go away” (p.28). Auburn reflects, “and I’m wondering if, like the confession in front of me, I’ll forever be comparing my life with him to my life without him. And I wonder if I’ll ever not be disappointed” (p.28).

One painting, in particular, seems to capture the attention of Auburn, making her assume a statue-like posture in front of it, and that is of a woman with the confession that inspired it “You Don’t Exist, God. And You If Do, You Should Be Ashamed” (p.32). This confession seems to resonate for both the artist and the viewer, for Owen and Auburn. Owen asserts, “I’m not sure if Auburn believes in God, but something about this painting got to her. A tear rolls down her cheek and slides slowly toward her jaw” (p.33). Reading that confession resonates for Auburn since it reminds her of Adam and how they both rejected death for claiming Adam, the one true love she has ever had. While for Owen, “this confession inspired

me to paint my mother. Not as I remember her, but how I imagined she looked when she was my age” (p.32).

This confession not only sparks Owen’s imaginative world of artistic expression , which only befits an artist of Own’s caliber, whose past and present, trauma and healing are represented through his art, moreover, this visual representation suggests an attempt to reconnect with his mother and a memorial of his feelings towards her after her death, “The words just reminded me of how I felt in the months following her death” (p.33). This artistic decision illustrates how grief can alter memory, making the past fluid rather than fixed. As with most traumatized individuals, the challenge of integrating a broken past into a present life’s narrative is the predicament of most survivors.

Nonetheless, Owen assumes a leadership role in his life’s narrative through art, reversing the dynamics of trauma and its agency on one’s thoughts and progression. By externalizing his emotions through artistic expression, Owen is able to channel his anger and sadness into something more creative and admirable, transforming the monologue of pain into a dialogue of two fractured souls, that of him and Auburn. Michael White and David Epston noted in their book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (1990) that externalization “Frees persons to take a lighter, more effective, and less stressed approach to “deadly serious” problems; and Presents options for dialogue, rather than monologue, about the problem” (p.40).

Owen is also able to reauthor his narrative structure, transforming his past trauma from something internal and abstract to a tangible and concrete work of art that represents an attitude of defiance against forgetfulness, a cry of remembrance for his late mother and a memorial to honor her death. And since trauma disrupts the narrative-building function of the self, Owen finds such function in art where his emotions are transcending, creating a portrait of his mother as a youthful young lady whose face is rendered in a loose, dripping style with dark deep eyes and a slightly downturned mouth. White and Eptson emphasized that “Re-authoring involves

relocating a person/family's experience in new narratives, such that the previously dominant story becomes obsolete" (p.127)

Owen confesses to Auburn that every time he feels heartbroken over remembering his family, he starts painting his mother and misses how she used to make him feel, "Because no matter what, no matter where we were, her smile would always comfort me... and it would take away every single fear or worry I had" (Hoover, 2015, p.151). He adds, "And I miss that. Sometimes I miss it so much, the only way I can make myself feel better is to paint her" (p.151). In her book, *Art and Mourning the Role of Creativity in Healing Trauma and Loss* (2016), Esther Dreifuss-Kattan, a psychoanalyst, art therapist and artist concluded that "Art-making—with its symbolization and exteriorization at a time of personal loss and trauma—allows for a gradual modulation of affects. It fosters personal reinvention through the reconstruction of the artist's past, allowing her to become her own witness" (p.3).

But one must not forget that writing represents the string where all these artworks are connected and where healing and inspiration are fostered, or at least as DeSalvo puts it, "writing may help us ward off the most crippling aspects of depression...It can provide a new and healthier obsession...And, perhaps most important, it can provide an imaginative, healing antitoxin" (p.176). It is these confessions which glue together these anonymous pieces of different stories which seem non-linear, at the beginning, into one coherent narrative that moves both Owen and Auburn to act, to fight back, and to face those past dark secrets which are transformed from depressive fragments of a past weaker self-image into a new creative and open to share personas.

By such act of storytelling, Owen captures not only his pain and Auburn's but also that of others' who are afraid to share or who are unable to find a nonjudgmental listener. Although DeSalvo speaks of storytelling in the form of writing, it is, nonetheless, equally relevant to assume that Owen's art, which is inspired by the stories people write, is a beautiful illustration

of storytelling which promotes empathy, not only on a personal level but on a collective one as well, for the people involved. DeSalvo writes that “storytelling teaches or reteaches us empathy. This trait is a prerequisite for treating others well. But it depends upon our ability to imagine what it feels like to be another person” (p.167). She adds, “We do this through storytelling. Because the capacity for empathy is often lost in extreme situations, restoring empathy in survivors is essential. Writing is one important way to accomplish this” (p.167).

As two broken souls, lost in a turmoil of past traumas, Owen and Auburn find solace and connection which foster their recovery by attentively listening to and positively commenting on each other’s stories and by highlighting the strengths they see in one another, becoming each other’s therapists. One instance of such therapeutic engagement is told by Auburn, where she explains to Owen how she had to give up legal custody to Lydia, “Once AJ was born, she took over completely. She was never pleased with how I did anything. She made me feel ignorant. And after a while, I started to believe her” (Hoover, 2015, p.154). She goes on to say that “After all, I was young, and she had raised children before, so I assumed she knew more than me” (p.154). She adds that “By the time I graduated high school, Lydia was making all the decisions for him. And one of those decisions was that he was going to stay with her while I attended college” (p.154).

Owen not only listens attentively and nonjudgmentally but rather shows signs of empathy for what is being heard. Auburn remarks, “I glance up at him and nod, slightly worried as to what I might see in his eyes. Contempt? Disappointment? When our eyes meet, I don’t see either of those things. I see sympathy” (p.155). Physical support was yet another equally important part of the conversation since it made Auburn feel connected and encouraged, “Owen finds my hand and pulls it between us, holding on to it. I appreciate the encouraging gesture, because this is a hard confession” (p.154). Owen takes the role of therapist in confirming and

solidifying Auburn's character and choices, showing appraisal by telling her that "I'm pretty sure you just made determination my favorite quality in a person" (p.156).

Externalizing conversations such as this one are essential in the journey of recovery since they break the dominant narrative by treating problems as external entities rather than inherent traits of someone's character, promoting agency and empowerment for troubled individuals such as Auburn. As a result, Auburn begins to remember what her mother used to say that "there are people you meet and get to know, and then there are people you meet and already know. I feel like Owen is the latter" (p.157), making her realize that,

Our personalities seem to complement each other, like we've known
one another our whole lives. I had no idea until today just how much
I need someone like him in my life. Someone to fill the holes that
Lydia has created in my self-esteem. (p.157)

The lives of Auburn and Owen take a pivotal turn when Owen is arrested for drug possession by Trey, Adam's brother, following a traffic stop on the night Owen went to assist his father and consequently is sent to jail, in yet another act of altruism. He accepts responsibility, fully aware that "This is the last thing my father needs. If he loses his career on top of everything else he's lost, there's no way he would survive" (p.195). And after a month spent in jail, Owen returns home only to find his father still consuming unlicensed pills, "But here he is with more pills. I'm not sure how he got these, but it makes me nervous that someone else out there other than myself and Harrison now knows about his addiction. He's being reckless now" (p.216-217).

Owen wakes up his father and, in an emotionally intense encounter, decides to throw away his father's pills down the drain, with his father yelling and demanding to be given those pills while hardly catching one pill and shoving it in his mouth. This makes Owen feel sick, "It makes my stomach hurt. He seems so much less human when he's this desperate and weak.

When the last pill is gone, I turn and face him. He's so ashamed; he won't even look at me" (p.219). Interestingly, it is Auburn who drives Owen to ultimately confront his father after years of avoidance. Owen tells his father of his love for Auburn and notes, "I watched her with her son. I've seen what she sacrifices for him" (p.219).

By witnessing Auburn's dedication to her child, Owen begins to realize what true parental love means. Owen's confrontation with his father is, in essence, a plea for accountability, an appeal for him to acknowledge the damage his addiction has caused, but more importantly a peak transformational encounter to face what has been avoided and neglected for years, the silence which set them apart. Owen reveals, "I've seen what lengths a parent should go to in order to ensure their child has the best possible life they can give them" (p.219). He adds, "And when I see her with him, I think of you and me, and how we're so fucked up, Dad. We've been fucked up since that night" (p.219) and continues to say, signifying his emotional growth and recognition that unconditional support does not mean enabling destructive behaviour:

And every moment since then, the only thing I've wanted is to see you try to get better. But you haven't. It's just gotten worse, and I can't sit here and be a part of it. You're killing yourself, and I won't let the guilt of seeing you suffer excuse the things I do for you anymore. (p.219-220)

Trey, who sees Owen as a threat to his relationship with Auburn, forbids Auburn from ever seeing Owen, falsely accusing the young artist of being arrested for possession, leaving Auburn shocked, in another pitfall of silence. Trey, unlike his brother Adam, seeks to take control of Auburn's life and, just like his mother Lydia, finds Auburn's submissiveness appealing and empowering. Owen is forced to leave Auburn's apartment without having the opportunity to tell his side of the story. Yet, as soon as both men leave, she finds a note by

Owen that reads, “Please come by my studio tonight. We need to talk” (p.164), leaving Auburn to meditate on the consequences of not disclosing on partners’ relationship, “It’s crazy how different things are between us now. Two hours ago, everything was perfect. And now... It’s amazing how much distance one truth can create between two people” (p.166).

Auburn is left to ponder her future life and her son’s after being told by Trey to consider marrying him since it means she gets to live with her son. Auburn thinks, “He could provide for us in a way that I can’t do on my own. There isn’t a reason in the world why I shouldn’t want to make this work with Trey other than my own selfishness” (p.229-230). However, as soon as Trey leaves for a conference in San Antonio, Auburn begins to write anonymous confessions, sliding them in a slot in Owen’s shop. Interestingly, for Auburn such act feels like therapy, “Every day that I walk by his studio, I inconspicuously slip a piece of paper in the slot. I’ve left over twenty confessions in the last few weeks... Most of the confessions are trivial things that have nothing to do with him” (p.227). She adds, “They usually have to do with AJ, and I never write them in such a way that Owen would be able to tell it was me. I’m sure he would never even guess that I leave them. But it feels like a form of therapy, anyway” (Hoover, 2015, p.227).

Writing helps Auburn to express on paper, what she otherwise finds challenging to address verbally. Although she mentions that she writes trivial things, however, she surprisingly discovers that her writing is way too revealing than what she expects, since she finds herself sliding a daring confession that reads, “I think about you every time he kisses me” (p.227). Such writing helps Auburn to revalue her emotion concerning Owen, making her feel emotionally liberated. It also helps her to share parts of her with someone who enjoys being involved in her life and her son’s. Love is empowering, and when a person feels deeply connected to another, they open up to a life with meaning. For Auburn, and as with many trauma survivors, a traumatic experience can shatter their self-image and rip that meaning apart.

Nonetheless, with love comes hope and with disclosure comes revaluation and empowerment. James Pennebaker and his colleague Joshua M. Smyth (2016) noted that “Talking or writing about upsetting things can influence our basic values, our daily thinking patterns, and our feelings about ourselves” (p.2).

Writing also helps Auburn to take initiative and empowers her to reveal a part of her which has been suppressed and buried for years after Adam’s death. However, such transformation is usually challenging for someone like Auburn who has been marginalized and undervalued by Adam’s family. She explores her growing love with doubt and views it as pure selfishness, yet this does not stop her from writing a confession which appears as an invitation for the man who made her feel loved and understood in years. Auburn remarks, “I keep telling myself that leaving this confession is just to get closure so I can move ahead with Trey, but I know it’s for purely selfish reasons” (Hoover,2015, p.227). She pulls out another piece of paper from her purse and quickly jots down a few words, “He’s out of town this weekend” (p.227).

Auburn and Owen do meet at his art shop where the two share an intimate night. It is important to consider how writing has facilitated such a romantic connection and has invited the two to reconsider how they both felt about each other. Owen tells her “I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give me. Because I know that if you walk out that door, then ten years from now . . . twenty years from now... we’ll wish we had listened to our hearts when we think back on tonight” (p.236). At which Auburn replies ““That’s what scares me” I tell him. “I’m afraid if I listen to my heart once, I’ll never figure out how to ignore it again” (p.236). Caught in a struggle between heart and mind, Auburn finds herself trapped between her love for Owen and a decision to let go of him once and for all, yet her feelings for him are too strong to ignore, leading the two to fully express their affection with Auburn commenting, “It reminds me of the day I had to say good-bye to Adam. I knew what we felt was more than what people gave us

credit for” (p.241), sadly adding, “and being torn away from him before I was ready took me forever to get over” (p.241).

Upon waking up the next day, Owen finds a confession left by Auburn on his pillow, he begins to “open the folded piece of paper and read her words. I’ll think about last night forever, Owen. Even when I Shouldn’t” (p.243). Owen’s reaction to Auburn’s departure is deeply tied to his identity as an artist. He quickly grabs an unfinished portrait of Auburn after reading the confession she left several times, he doesn’t just mourn; he channels his pain into painting. Once again art inspires Owen to be creative and process his emotions on canvas. Auburn’s confession acts as a final piece of herself that Owen can hold onto, reinforcing the novel’s recurring motif of honesty and vulnerability. He comments, “I stare down at the confession, imagining exactly what she must have looked like when she wrote it, and I finally have the inspiration I need to finish the portrait. I pick up my brush, and I paint her” (p.244).

In her book *An Introduction to Art Therapy: Studies of the “Free” Art Expression of Behavior Problem Children and Adolescents As a Means of Diagnosis and Therapy* (1950), the American psychologist Margaret Naumburg emphasized that art offers “a specialized additional nonverbal technique for releasing, through symbolic imagery, the unconscious, repressed emotions” (p. vii). The following passage reinforces the theme of confession and artistic expression as forms of Catharsis, demonstrating how creativity can be an avenue for healing, Owen’s art becomes a medium through which Owen captures his longings and a symbolic representation of what his memory of Auburn is like. Furthermore, art helps to preserve a memory of Auburn which words cannot fully demonstrate. He clearly expresses such sentiment remarking:

It’s probably the most realistic painting I’ve ever laid out on canvas.

Her expression is exactly how I want to remember her. It’s not a happy expression. In fact, she looks kind of sad. I want to think it’s

the same look she'll get on her face every time she thinks about me.

A look that reveals how much she misses me. Even when she shouldn't. (p.244)

Another critical moment in the novel follows Owen, who comes back to his shop after meeting with his friend Harrison, shocked to find all his artworks smeared by Trey with red paint, yet only one artwork survives and that is Auburn's with the confession missing. Owen reveals, "Red paint lines the walls, the floors, covers every painting in the entire downstairs area... I touch the paint smeared across the canvas and can tell it's already drying" (p.246). Trey's brutal attack on the studio is a desperate attempt to silence the unspoken dialogue weaving between the artworks, Owen, and Auburn. Symbolically, it is an act to silence the wound of trauma which, as Caruth insisted in her description of trauma, as "always a story of a wound that cries out" (p. 4) to be heard and to be assimilated.

Owen goes to Auburn's apartment to find that she has been sexually assaulted by Trey which only brings Auburn to yet another emotional retreat as she refuses to report the incident. She tells Owen,

you aren't a father, so I can't expect you to understand my decisions. If I report him, things will only get worse. I have to do whatever I can to keep my relationship with my son intact. If that includes forgiving Trey and having to apologize to him for what happened between you and me . . . then that's what I have to do. I can't expect you to understand that, but I need you to support it. You don't know what it's like to give up your entire life for someone. (Hoover, 2015, p.263)

Ironically, Owen did give his entire life for his father, and it cost him losing her and him. Auburn curiously asks, "What relationship have you ever had to sacrifice?" I lift my head

slowly, looking at her with everything that I have. “Us, Auburn. I’ve had to sacrifice us” (p.264). The two engage in a cathartic emotional release following Owen’s account, who finds strength in his relationship with Auburn, “If I have to come clean about my father and take Trey to court, I’ll do it. You deserve to be in AJ’s life, and if we continue to allow Trey’s threats to affect our decisions, he’ll never stop” (p.266). Owen adds, “He’ll never allow us to be together and he’ll do whatever he can to keep you from AJ unless you’re with him. It’s all about the power with people like him, but we need to stop allowing him to have it” (p.266).

In the same vein, Auburn finds empowerment and support in her love for Owen commenting, “It’s amazing how you don’t realize just how alone and scared you were until you have someone by your side to support you” (p.267). She admirably notes, “Owen has sacrificed so much for his father, and now he’s doing the same for me. He’s exactly the type of man AJ needs as a role model in his life” (p.267). However, once again Trey intervenes, surprising the two at Owen’s apartment. Owen asks Auburn to call the police, at which point Trey responds, “And who will they believe? The addict and the whore who got pregnant at fifteen? Or the cop?” (p.276), and shockingly admits, “Oh, and let’s not forget the contraband you have hidden all over your studio. There’s also that” (p.276).

The two are escorted by Trey to the police station, and during the ride, the three are engaged in the climax of this intertwining narrative. Auburn angrily questions Trey’s actions exclaiming, “You think I’m just going to forget the fact that you attacked me? That you destroyed Owen’s studio? That you’re framing him?” (p.279), who, on the other hand, shows no remorse and furiously insists that “I’m not Adam. I’m Trey. And I suggest if you want to continue being the half-assed mother you are to my nephew, you’ll say whatever the fuck I tell you to say” (p.280). However, such an unfathomable bond as the one Auburn and Owen share does not break under threat but rather grows thicker in pursuit of truth and justice that both unjustly were deprived of.

Auburn tracks down Gallahan's home address. Upon discovering a recording, which Auburn provides regarding yesterday's encounter with Trey, Gallahan calls both Trey and Lydia for a reckoning. Trey and Lydia agree to Auburn's terms, and the once-submissive, mistreated Auburn is now the one pulling the strings of her life's narrative, becoming the master of her own destiny. In an intense display of resiliency, Auburn tells Lydia, "he's my son, Lydia. He needs to be with me. And if I have to use your son against you in order to get my son back, then so help me God, I will" (p.286). Auburn not only challenges Lydia's authority but also directly confronts Trey, demonstrating that she is no longer the submissive figure who can be easily controlled or silenced. Trey says, "You realize this is blackmail" (p.287), with Auburn calmly nodding, "I learned from the best" (p.287).

In a remarkable plot twist, and by the end of the novel, Colleen Hoover masterfully takes us back four years earlier, revealing how this master narrative has been deeply interwoven in that hospital which Adam, Auburn and Owen shared. This early, seemingly chance meeting lays the foundation for the entire narrative, subtly foreshadowing the profound impact both men, and by extension Auburn, will have on each other's lives. Owen, who had been eavesdropping for weeks on Adam and Auburn's conversations, was deeply influenced by their story, which led him to paint their sorrowful tale on a canvas. The painting was of two hands desperately trying to touch each other with a space separating them. Adam, who was amazed by the details that captured their story, wrote a confession of his own addressed to Auburn, "I'll love you forever. Even when I can't" (p.306).

Owen's future life as an artist has been entirely driven by the touching story he witnessed at the hospital. He profoundly expresses, "I think with the inadvertent help of her and Adam, I may have just discovered my calling" (p.306). Such a calling, years later, proves to be fate which brings Owen and Auburn together. Owen reveals to Auburn, "I didn't choose to be an artist. I think it kind of chose me" (p.158). Fate may indeed have brought the two into

each other's lives; however, it was their love, compassion, and empathetic witnessing of one another's past and shared pain that led them to become the masters of their fate, or, as Carl Jung puts it, "I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become" (as cited in Eckl, 2010, p. 187).

Chapter Three

Writing as Therapy in *Verity* (2018)

Colleen Hoover's *Verity* is a novel that presents a narrative of two characters burdened by loss and yearning for meaning in a world marked by trauma. Though both are profoundly shaped by the power of writing and self-expression, yet they diverge in their responses to the adversities that define their lives. With one finding solace in writing as a means to restore coherence and achieve therapeutic recovery from the tragic loss of her children, while the other is consumed by psychological anguish, rationalizing an act as grotesque as murder in order to steal the life that offers an answer to her existential dismay. In this narrative, Hoover leaves readers and characters alike to question the meaning of psychological growth and regression since meaning becomes an elusive and elastic device for coping with the void left by trauma. Yet, the question remains as to what extent this transformation costs and what constitutes meaningful post-traumatic growth. Thus, with the words of Lowen Ashleigh, "I hear the crack of his skull before the spattering of blood reaches me" (Hoover, 2018, p.7), Hoover opens her novel with the sight and smell of blood, inviting readers into a world marked by curiosity, trauma and death.

Lowen, an introverted and socially anxious novelist, finds herself faced with a horrible accident, witnessing a man's skull being crushed under a truck's tire. However, as tragic as the accident was, it served as a window through which readers were invited to peer into the hidden chambers of Lowen's mind and traumatic world. Lowen, who fled Virginia in search of a city in which she moves unnoticed and where her emotional state is irrelevant, sadly identifies a defining affliction of contemporary society and its victimizing aspect and perhaps the scariest, "He was in the wrong, looking casually down at his phone, probably a side effect of crossing the same street without incident many times before. Death by routine" (p.7).

In their paper *Social Withdrawal in Childhood*, Rubin et al. (2008) noted that “social withdrawal is linked to psychological maladaptation as it represents a behavioral expression of internalized thoughts and feelings of social anxiety or depression” (p.142). They further contended that “social withdrawal is also associated with loneliness and depressed affect from the earliest years of childhood through early adolescence” (p.154). Just as the man whom she just witnessed his death, Lowen suffers a psychological death by routine and excruciating numbness rooted in a troubled past. Despite showing slight concern for the man and disapproval of the spectators’ indifference to the tragedy, it is this uncaring and unbecoming pain that Lowen, who has lived in Manhattan for ten years, now finds both despicable and appealing.

The socially withdrawn Lowen considers Manhattan a ghost city where “a pedestrian struck by a vehicle happens so often, it’s not much more than an inconvenience. A delay in traffic for some, a ruined wardrobe for others. This probably happens so often, it won’t even end up in print” (Hoover, 2018, p.8). However, for Lowen:

As much as the indifference in some of the people here disturbs me, it’s exactly why I moved to this city ten years ago. People like me belong in overpopulated cities. The state of my life is irrelevant in a place this size. There are far more people here with stories much more pitiful than mine. Here, I’m invisible. Unimportant. Manhattan is too crowded to give a shit about me, and I love her for it. (p.8)

In their paper *The Association between Psychosocial Stress, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Social Withdrawal and Psychosis Relapse: A Systematic Review*, Almuqrin et al. (2023) noted that “Social withdrawal refers to one’s withdrawal from interpersonal/social relationships accompanied by detachment and an apathetic attitude... Social withdrawal is one of the negative symptoms of psychosis that... explains the small social network observed in

individuals suffering from psychosis” (p.2). This social withdrawal for Lowen is a psychological symptom of traumatic injury that occurred during childhood and with this close encounter with death, Lowen thinks back of her past driven by the smell of blood to remember what she fiercely has tried to forget, “I can smell the blood now. The tanginess in the air sends my mind whirling back to when I was ten. The smell of blood was strong enough to remember it all these years later” (Hoover,2018, p.9).

Lowen who thinks of her childhood as “unnatural”, fails to cope with a part of her she struggles to understand and perhaps a convenient sign of addressing the ambiguity regarding her disturbed state of mind in the events to follow. At the age of ten, Lowen’s life changed drastically after having her first encounter with death, falling ill under a sleepwalking disorder that made her relationship with her mother fall apart. As a child, Lowen woke up covered in blood and agonizing in pain, feeling her wrist cut while being unaware of the events which led to it.

In his work *Developmental Trauma Disorder: Toward a Rational Diagnosis for Chronically Traumatized Children* (2009), van der Kolk noted that “at the core of traumatic stress is a breakdown in the capacity to regulate internal states. If the distress does not let up, children dissociate: the relevant sensations, affects and cognitions cannot be associated (they are dissociated into sensory fragments” (p.5). Similarly, for Lowen, her mother’s reaction after reviewing the camera footage, characterized by restlessness, exclusion and poor judgement, was instrumental in shaping the core of her traumatic stress and fostering a solitary and withdrawn version of her that grew up fearful of new attachments and bonds. Moreover, rather than expressing genuine concern and love for a child as confused and hurt as Lowen, her mother sends her for a two-week psychiatric evaluation. After returning home, Lowen struggled to regulate her internal state as a result of her mother retreating to a spare bedroom farther down the hall and locking the door from the inside with three locks.

This reaction grows deep inside young Lowen, whose memory of her childhood experiences has shaped a character trait she holds her mother responsible for: her tendency to be a loner. Moreover, the sensory fragments of her childhood experiences have not faded with time but rather manifested themselves in an adult version of Lowen, who fails to integrate a healthy psychological progression. And in the absence of new and close attachment as a child, Lowen reveals that “she certainly didn’t trust me as a child. She kept me fairly secluded from people outside of school because she was afraid of what I might be capable of during my many sleepwalking episodes” (Hoover, 2018, p.14). Lowen adds, “That paranoia bled into my adulthood, and by then, I was set in my ways. A loner. Very few friends and not much of a social life” (p.14). Consequently, Lowen develops a seemingly detached attitude that changes the way she views herself and others, no more than inconvenience in a world devoid of meaning.

Van der Kolk (2009) emphasized the long-term psychological and physiological consequences that result from early adverse experiences primarily neglect and emotional detachment on a child noting that “When caregivers are emotionally absent, inconsistent, frustrating... neglectful, children are liable to become intolerably distressed... they experience excessive anxiety, anger, and longings to be taken care of” (p.229). Similarly, as Lowen grows older, her mother’s neglect becomes a traumatic symptom of an isolated Lowen who longs for care and does not healthily obtain it. After losing her dad at the age of nine, Lowen is left alone with a mother who feels threatened by her and one who remains disconnected from a child who longs for attention and love, a child whose needs were neither attended to nor blessed with the comfort of having a supportive parent, adding yet another layer of depression to which Lowen indefinably adheres.

In their research, *Is Trauma Isolating, or Does Isolation Traumatize? Loneliness and Posttraumatic Stress Mutually Reinforce One Another in the Aftermath of Environmental*

Disaster (2025), Cruwys and his colleagues noted that “social connections are frequently compromised by the trauma itself. That is, trauma can lead to isolation and ostracization, particularly when the traumatic experience itself is stigmatized” (p.2). In the same vein, years later, while deprived of any kind of social connection as she takes care of her mother, who has been diagnosed with cancer, Lowen develops a solitary and anxious personality that transforms into “a deeply crippling aversion to other humans” (Hoover, 2018, p.13).

Moreover, Lowen feels financially and psychologically deprived, trapped in an apartment she cannot afford and a world where she does not belong. Her past almost becomes inseparable from her present with her mother acting as a constant reminder of a string she wishes to detach. Now in debt and secluded from social life, Lowen is left to meditate on her existential crisis of solitude which almost seems as insignificant in size as the ant she observes crawling down her leg. She remarks,

The ant was alone ...searching for food or friends. He seemed confused by his solitude. Or maybe he was excited for his newfound freedom. I couldn't help but wonder why he was alone... The fact that I was curious about the ant's current situation was a clear sign I needed to leave my apartment. (p.13)

According to Gary Reker in his work *Personal Meaning, Optimism, and Choice: Existential Predictors of Depression in Community and Institutional Elderly* (1997), meaning in life is defined as “having a sense of direction, a sense of order, and a reason for existence, a clear sense of personal identity, and a greater social consciousness” (p.710). Consistent with the idea of a loss of meaning, trauma challenges existential meaning and can sometimes obscure any sense of order in a chaotic world. This disruption often leads victims to question their place within a larger community and leaves them vulnerable to identity deformation.

Identity is conceptualized as a linking thread of meaning that connects past to future. However, grief and trauma destabilise or even destroy that linking thread and the sense of ontological security. From an existential and traumatic perspective, Lowen strives for meaning that grows deeply inside her as an adult without a clear and well-restored sense of personal identity. In their work *The Existential Basis of Trauma* (2000), Thompson and Walsh stressed that

Trauma can therefore be seen as an existential injury, insofar as it can damage, distort or even destroy our sense of self and how we fit into the wider world. It undermines the basis of our existence, severely altering how we see the world and how we make sense of it — in effect, destabilising or even shattering our frameworks of meaning, our spiritual and existential foundations. (p.379)

In the same vein, Lowen, who suffers from fractured personal identity and who oscillates between feeling confused and being emotionally immature following her mother's death, begins to long for a purpose and a sort of freedom an ant strayed from her pack would struggle to find. Moreover, she feels concerned that “after being cooped up caring for my mother for so long, once I stepped out into the hallway I would be just as confused as that ant. Left, right, inside, outside, where are my friends, where is the food?” (Hoover, 2018, p.13).

Notably, some traumatic experiences or reactions evoke feelings of rage and discontent which lead victims of trauma into a state of unfulfillment that some psychiatrists call dysphoria, a condition that Herman (2015) explains as “a state of confusion, agitation, emptiness, and utter aloneness” (p.108). This dysphoric unsettlement haunts Lowen who aspires for meaning and a new destination, given into account that her sales as an artist are small enough to barely keep her alive or to pay a year's rent.

Amid this existential disarray, another side of Lowen's life is revealed, highlighting her desire for an emotional escape and wish to feel cherished. At the expense of genuine love, Lowen enters into a sexual relationship with her agent, Corey, a bond sustained more by fleshly desire and physical gratification than by true affection or sincere concern. This short-lived relationship only lasted because neither of them was interested in anyone else and as such, Lowen asserts, "was convenient until it wasn't. But the reason our actual relationship was so short-lived is because he was in love with another woman. Never mind that the other woman in our relationship was also me." (Hoover, 2018, p.18).

Corey who, as Lowen states, "fell in love with the female protagonist of my first novel...before he ever spoke to me...assumed my character's personality was a close reflection of my own, when in fact, I couldn't be more opposite from her" (p.18), realises how incompatible he and Lowen are, seeing how physiologically draining it is to engage with someone who requires deep emotional processing. Lowen articulates such an interpretation by speculating that "he realized we weren't compatible. I wasn't heroic. I wasn't simple. I was difficult. An emotionally challenging puzzle he wasn't up for solving" (p.19).

In their research on *Coping Strategies Used by Hypersexual Patients to Defend Against the Painful Effects of Shame*, Reid et al. (2009) noted that "sex provides a temporary tranquilizer to inoculate against negative self criticism and painful shame. In addition to being self-soothing...represent attempts to seek validation of one's self-worth" (p.128). Similarly, for Lowen, engaging in sexual and emotionless encounters is an attempt to mediate or regulate her emotional dysfunction at both social and personal levels, as well as a form of dissociation from the excruciating emptiness of her existence.

In their work on patients suffering from alexithymia, emotional instability, and vulnerability to stress, Reid et al. (2008) contended that "It can be reasonably argued that sexual activity provides a mood-altering experience enabling individuals to disassociate from

uncomfortable, awkward, or unpleasant emotions” (p.135). Consequently, Lowen’s feeling of emptiness and loneliness is numbed by physical sensation, which only proves to be temporary and unsustainable with time, but rather an emotional escape that is similar to some destructive adaptive measures many trauma victims endorse to put their pain at ease, a temporary one at least.

Lowen’s life takes a sudden turn as she heads to Pantem press, interested to engage in a business offer which could potentially change her life forever. However, this opportunity served as a psychological display in which her insecurities, wrecked past, and emotional inconsistency came into play. The contract which Pantem press has offered proved irresistible for young Lowen who is left penniless and orphaned. This is where her life and emotional past intersect with that of Verity Crawford’s. Verity is a successful writer known for her novels which are written from the villain's point of view and who is suffering from a clinical death. Yet, this rewarding offer comes at a price an introverted Lowen is unable to afford, making her life and identity public.

Lowen considers herself an agoraphobic oriented individual and fears that her insecurities might be displayed in public, attracting an attention she has worked years to avoid. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders third edition (1980), agoraphobia is a “marked fear and avoidance of being alone or in public places from which escape might be difficult or help not available in case of sudden incapacitations” (p.226). Yet, little did Lowen know that her fear of public places would be the least of her concerns.

In their article *The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives* (2000), Timothy C. Brock and Melanie C. Green proposed a narrative transportation theory which suggests that “individuals are absorbed into a story or transported into a narrative world, they may show effects of the story on their real-world beliefs” (p.701). Further adding that “We

conceptualized transportation into a narrative world as a distinct mental process, an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings” (p.701).

The central premise of transportation theory is that readers can be transported into a narrative world, becoming mentally immersed in the world of the story. When individuals are transported into a narrative, they are more likely to change their real-world beliefs and behaviors to match those suggested by the story or adjust them accordingly. As Lowen moves to Crawford’s residency to complete Verity’s work and while inspecting several boxes in Verity’s office, rummaging through their contents, she finds an unrecognized manuscript entitled *So Be It*. Surprisingly, Lowen feels absorbed by the narrative she encounters in the autobiography to the extent that she wishes to replace its main protagonist, all while feeling seduced by sexual fantasies and longing for a place in meaningful institutions such as marriage or motherhood.

Lowen begins to imagine a transference of life itself while being fully immersed in Verity’s confessional autobiography. To Lowen, the vacancy in the Crawford household, a mentally absent mother unable to nurture, a son yearning for care, and a husband shattered by grief, becomes a moral opening, a narrative she convinces herself she can inhabit. In attempting to rediscover meaning amid her existential loss, Lowen attempts to replace Verity and fill a role that gives purpose to her life, one which resembles as a counteract to her own fragmentation.

What began as literary co-authorship turns, gradually and with each chapter’s ending, into a fixation and co-ownership over Jeremy. Seeing verity on a wheelchair parked on the back porch, Lowen observes, “It’s as if she were an egg, cracked open and poured out, and all that’s left are the tiny fragments of hard shell” (Hoover,2018, p.63), adding that she cannot help “but wonder how Jeremy is handling all this. He’s a concrete pillar on the outside, but the

inside has to be hollow. It's disappointing, knowing this is his life now. Caring for an egg shell with no yolk" (p.63).

After having read the manuscript in full, Lowen's personality undergoes a major transformation. She becomes a living testament to the power of words and how a narrative, so eloquently yet wickedly well-polished, can consume someone such as Lowen, whose insecurities are vivid. The words of the manuscript seep deep into her soul and eventually inhabit her, twisting her feelings until she can no longer distinguish her own longing from Verity's poisoned confessions.

Psychologically, Lowen's course of action demonstrates that she is not being merely manipulated by Verity's autobiographical account, rather she becomes an accomplice in the act, shaping the narrative as she sees fit. Lowen feels that the "manuscript is definitely fucking with my head. I feel like I'm falling in love with the man, and I've only known him for a few weeks. But I'm not only falling in love with him in real life" (p.173). Even her love for Jeremy is, "because of Verity's words. Everything she revealed about him has given me insight into the kind of person he is, and he deserves better than what she gave him. I want to give him what she never did" (p.173).

On the other hand, Verity's journey with therapeutic writing started years earlier, during a dinner with Jeremy and Amanda Thomas, her editor at Pantem Press. Verity, who sought counselling for her new upcoming novel from Amanda, incorporates a new writing technique to develop her craft as a writer. Verity, who found it difficult to make the voices of her characters appear authentic, receives inspiration from Amanda who suggests a writing technique she learned at grade school called antagonistic journaling, a process of writing which encompasses writing from the villain's point of view but with a twist.

Verity explains, “She said antagonistic journaling was the best way to improve my craft. She said I needed to get into the mind of an evil character by writing journal entries from my own life. . . things that really happened” (p.195). Verity adds:

but to make my inner dialogue in the journal entry be the opposite from what I was actually thinking at the time. She told me to start by writing about the day you and I met. She said I should write down what I was wearing, where we met and what our conversation was that night, but to make my inner dialogue more sinister than it actually was. It sounded simple. Harmless. (p.195)

What began as a craft polishing technique gradually evolved into a habitual practise which felt exhilarating for Verity, particularly as she grew increasingly absorbed in impersonating the villain’s voice. Every new milestone in Verity’s relationship with Jeremy and their shared life, from her pregnancy to the children’s birth and the accompanying challenges that she faced as a mother, were recorded with immense detail and incorporated into a broken narrative that needed cohesiveness and clarity. This is why Verity needed to mend all the scattered pieces or parts into a master narrative.

In their article *Effects of Writing about Traumatic Experiences: The Necessity for Narrative Structuring* (2001), Joshua Smyth and his fellow researchers argued that “the organization aspects of narrative play a critical role in the health benefits of writing about traumatic events and that written disclosure lacking narrative formation may not be beneficial” (p. 171). Similarly, Verity notes, “I needed to tie the chapters together with an overall storyline so that the autobiography was more cohesive, so I pushed the envelope with every scene to make it more jarring. More disturbing” (Hoover,2018, p.196). This idea, Verity admits, “helped immensely, which is why I was able to create such realistic, terrifying characters in my novels.

It's why they sold, because I was good at it" (p.196). By the time Verity had finished her third novel, she felt that she had mastered the craft.

In his book, *The Secret Life of Pronouns* (2011), Pennebaker suggested that it would be beneficial for trauma survivors to "work to construct a meaningful story" (p.15) since "the cognitive work they put into the story results in a better product and one that is more likely to allow them to get through their trauma" (p.15). This exercise of writing had surprisingly led Verity to discover a side of her personality which she never dared to explore before, the emotional intensity of her feelings after losing her daughters. To process her loss, Verity worked to construct a meaningful story that addresses her grief. Verity who "was cursed with this mind that never forgets a single thing" (Hoover, 2018, p.194), suffered unimaginable pain.

As counteraction to a mind overwhelmed by sadness, Verity relates, "My mind was in such a dark space though, and sometimes, as a writer, the only way to clear your mind is to let the darkness spill out onto a keyboard It was my therapy" (p.196). The autobiography thus became a therapeutic object where Verity can process and assimilate the loss, translating it into a written account where her darkest thoughts find a cathartic release. This aligns with the observations of Pennebaker and Smyth (2016), who proposed that

Disclosing or confronting a trauma helps us understand and ultimately assimilate the event. By talking or writing about a secret experience, we are translating the event into language. Once it is language based, we can better understand the experience and ultimately put it behind us. (p.11)

In the same vein, the American researcher Arthur Bochner (2013) referred to autoethnography as "a response to an existential crisis—a desire to do meaningful work and lead a meaningful life" (p.53). For Verity, the act of writing entails liberation and a cathartic practise where she could expel repressed thoughts and traumas onto the page, a form of

externalization which cleanses her psychologically. By engaging in writing the autobiography, Verity responded to a crisis of loss, with a narrative approach to therapy which encourages her to identify and generate her own alternative story through which she finds new meanings that are, as White and Epston (1990) have suggested on the outcome of those who seek narrative therapy, “more helpful, satisfying, and open-ended” (p.15).

Hence, writing for Verity was a re-authoring therapeutic procedure used to elicit powerful emotional distresses, transforming them into a fictional persona, elected to divert Verity’s feelings of loss into a fictional expression of therapeutic release. This goes in line with the observation of Celia Hunt, an American researcher and writer, who noted in her work *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing* (2000), “Writing fictional autobiography provides what one might call a ‘safe diagonal’, an oblique angle on problems of the self” (p.91). She further adds,

Instead of having to tackle problems head-on and therefore running the risk of provoking acute anxiety and the mobilising of defences, we are provided with a means of identifying psychological problems through observing the way they manifest themselves on the page.
(p.91)

Similarly, Verity, who is fully aware of her fragility and co-dependency on Jeremy, reveals that writing a fictional character by the name Lane has helped her to cope with the absence of her soul nourisher by channelling her love and longing into creative art instead of allowing it to consume her psychologically. After realising that confessing her emotional vulnerability towards Jeremy might jeopardize the relationship she obsessively attached her essence to, Verity reveals, “Those were thoughts I couldn’t admit to him...I might have been obsessed with him, but a woman knows if she wants to keep a man forever, she has to act like

she could get over him in a day” (Hoover, 2018, p. 58). She adds, “And that is when I became a writer” (p. 58). Verity explains:

I created a fictional Jeremy and called him Lane. When I was missing Jeremy, I’d write a chapter about Lane. My life over those next few months became less about Jeremy and more about my character. Who was, in a sense, still Jeremy. But writing about it instead of obsessing about it felt more productive. (p. 58)

Verity’s response to the loss took a literary form, with her writing becoming an almost dramatic and poetic portrayal of villainy and emotion since “grief by its nature is poetical, elegiac” (Cacciatore, 2017, p. 44). This poetic prose has been uniquely incorporated through her ability to “stretch truths where I see fit. I’m a writer” (p. 47). Moreover, Jeremy’s absence initiates a process of sublimation through writing for Verity, a psychological redirection of desire and dependency into creative production.

Critically, writing becomes a means to channel obsessive or destructive impulses into creative artmaking. Her longings for Jeremy are reincarnated and shaped into writing about a fictional character she creates by the name Lane. This goes in line with Freud’s theory of sublimation outlined in his essay “On Narcissism: An introduction” (2013) where he mentions that “sublimation is a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction; in this process the accent falls upon deflection from sexuality” (p. 94).

For Verity, such deflection takes shape in the act of writing novels, a retreat into fictional creation. Freud also spoke about sublimation as a diversion from genitalia toward something more creative such as art in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), “The progressive concealment of the body which goes along with civilization keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden

parts. It can, however, be diverted (“sublimated”) in the direction of art” (p.192). Put simply, sublimation is a redirection of instinctual energy into socially constructive channels.

Writing helps reveal the unnoticed feelings in grief that remain unresolved. Bodil Furnes and Elin Dysvik argued in their paper *Results from a Systematic Writing Program in Grief Process: Part 2* (2011) that “emotions are embedded in the body as impressions, and we experience them as expressions. The experience of grief creates an impression, and when this impression finds articulation, the person may achieve understanding” (p.16). For Verity, the act of writing has helped her to redirect the pain and guilt she felt after losing her daughter, an accidental death at the lake which intensified Verity’s feeling of helplessness and regret for not saving her daughter.

Verity, who feels she could have done better as a mother, fails to cope with the loss and consequently submits to trauma and grief. Verity admits, “Every part of me drowned in that lake with her... To this day, I blame myself. I was her mother. Her protector. And I assumed she’d be fine, so I focused on Crew for thirty seconds too long” (Hoover, 2018, p.197). In the same vein, Herman speaks about the severity of trauma reactions, mainly guilt affirming, “Feelings of guilt are especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people” (p.54). Herman adds, “To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience. Survivors... feel guilty for not risking their lives to save others” (p.54). Herman contends that this encounter with death leads survivors to suffer the consequence that is, “The violation of human connection, and consequently the risk of a post-traumatic disorder, is highest of all when the survivor has been not merely a passive witness but also an active participant in violent death or atrocity” (p.54).

According to van der Kolk (2014), “people cannot put traumatic events behind until they are able to acknowledge what has happened and start to recognise the invisible demons they’re struggling with” (p. 221). Similarly, for Verity, writing underscores an adaptation to

pain and a transformative technique utilized to maintain and explore the traumatic past while bearing witness to traumatic memory, which does not escape or haunt consciousness but is rather maintained and empowered by confronting and embracing past memories and reactions. Verity remarks, “My real world had grown so dark that I didn’t want to live in it that night. It’s why I escaped from it and spent the night writing about a world darker than the one I was living in” (Hoover, 2018, p.198).

Verity highlights some key points in understanding the complexity of what she had to endure, leading her to transform her pain and past into words that came “directly from the center of the gut, tearing through flesh and bone as they break free. Ugly and honest and bloody and a little bit terrifying, but completely exposed” (p.43). Verity believes: “A writer should never have the audacity to write about themselves unless they’re willing to separate every layer of protection between the author’s soul and their book” (p.43). She adds, “One should only walk away from an autobiography with, at best, an uncomfortable distaste for its author. I will deliver. (p.43)

By working on her autobiography and closing her laptop every night, Verity, using her words, was able “to close the door on the evil I created. That’s all it was. I needed for the imaginary version of my world to be darker than my real world. Otherwise, I would have wanted to leave them both” (p.198). In rewriting the event and registering her feelings of guilt and remorse, Verity’s narrative assumes a sensory dimension used to recuperate a complete narrative that defies the fractured memory which many trauma survivors resist or recollections of the event, hindering their psychological growth and consequently failing to approach different scenarios or unique outcomes of trauma that, without writing, might otherwise be dismissed and left unintegrated. Herman (2015) asserts:

A narrative that does not include the traumatic imagery and bodily sensations is barren and incomplete. The ultimate goal, however, is

to put the story, including its imagery, into words. The patient's first attempts to develop a narrative language may be partially dissociated. She may write down her story in an altered state of consciousness and then disavow it. (p.177)

For Verity, writing was a personal endeavor utilized to confront the shadows of overwhelming past by re-experiencing the emotions associated with the loss and had offered not only an emotional release, but a coping strategy through which she could navigate the grief in her heart. Verity asserts that writing was "A way to tap into the dark grief that was eating at me and eliminating it with every stroke of the keyboard" (Hoover, 2018, p.196). Verity thinks that "Putting all the blame onto this fictional villain I had created in that autobiography was one of the ways I coped" (p.196). Furthermore, by spilling her pain on paper, Verity endorses a memorial mourning through which the memory of her lost daughter is kept alive in writing. DeSalvo offers a similar perspective suggesting that "Because our writing, our work of art, is a concrete object, it becomes a memorial and a testimony to the resolution of the mourning process. And to the lost person and the lost self" (p.57). She further contends:

By writing about them, we give them posthumous life. By writing, we celebrate, too, our courage and survival. Engaging in writing, in creative work, then, permits us to pass from numbness to feeling, from denial to acceptance, from conflict and chaos to order and resolution, from rage and loss to profound growth, from grief to joy. (p.57)

Moreover, Verity's self-blame had proven significantly troubling and with the absence of a welcoming and empathetic witness to her side of the story, mainly her husband, writing then presented itself as a safe refuge for a writer who knows precisely how the power of words can change perspectives and support mood-shifting attitudes. Through writing, Verity is able

to find meaning amidst loss and chaos and this helped her emotional decline to be restored back to normal: “In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning” (Frankl, 2006, p. 113). Verity remarks on her thoughts the day her husband pulled their daughter from the lake, “I wanted to rip my heart out and feed it to you because I knew you no longer had one of your own. I didn’t want to live for another second after seeing your anguish... I watched your suspicion come to a head a few nights after Harper passed” (Hoover, 2018, p. 197).

For any trauma survivor, establishing a safe connection with others, mainly family members, a spouse or parents, is a must to resist the eventual outcome of trauma. Herman explicitly highlights the effects of social disconnection on trauma survivors by arguing that “In the aftermath of traumatic life events, survivors are highly vulnerable. Their sense of self has been shattered. That sense can be rebuilt only as it was built initially, in connection with others” (p. 61). Unfortunately for Verity, her relationship with her parents had been characterised by separation and severe long-term estrangement due to religious conflict.

During a conversation between Lowen and Jeremy at which Lowen asks about Verity’s parents amidst all this familial chaos, Jeremy responds, “They’re strange. Victor and Marjorie, insanely religious to their core. When they found out Verity was writing thriller and suspense novels, they acted like she was suddenly denouncing her religion to join a satanic cult” (Hoover, 2018, p. 128). Verity’s parents warned that “if she didn’t stop, they would never speak to her again” (p. 128).

In the absence of the emotional support Verity required, she turned to writing as a medium through which her narrative was inscribed into memory and her grief directly confronted. Similarly, Pennebaker and Evans (2014) stated that “expressive writing doesn’t need to be read by anyone in order for you to benefit from it” (p. 17). Van der Kolk (2014) also

noted that “people cannot put traumatic events behind until they are able to acknowledge what has happened and start to recognise the invisible demons they’re struggling with” (p. 221).

For Verity, this acknowledgment of her past and the struggle to heal from the invisible wounds of traumatic loss is only made possible with the story she created in her autobiography in which she achieved insight into her pain and anguish which similarly echoes what Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis emphasized in their paper *Parentification in Late Adolescence and Selected Features of the Family System* (2016) that “autoethnographic stories attempt to bring vivid and resonant frames of understanding to one’s anguish and pain” (p. 69).

The final encounter that the three characters share marks a pivotal moment in the novel, where disclosure and the power of trauma to silence one’s pain, as well as the need for articulation, come to the forefront. Jeremy, furious after reading the manuscript, starts strangling Verity to death while Lowen, whose trauma found no place for articulation and empathy, performs an act just as evil in nature as those she encountered in the manuscript, a trajectory of personal transformation blossoming into wicked complicity.

Lowen crosses a threshold from witness to perpetrator, whispering instructions to Jeremy to frame the murder as a natural death, “You have to make it look like an accident... Make her vomit. Cover her nose and mouth until she stops breathing. It’ll look like she aspirated in her sleep” (Hoover, 2018, p. 187). She undergoes a process of moral disengagement, where, in order to protect those she now considers hers, she must commit a necessary evil, and in doing so, reframes murder not as an act of killing but as one committed for the sake of protection.

Seven months later, Lowen is with a child, and she and Jeremy put the house up for sale, a desperate attempt to reconcile a destructive past in a new present narrative without Verity. Lowen’s newfound life does not progress unchallenged for long, for the past creeps once more into her life, proving once again the taunting symptoms of post-traumatic stress

disorder that haunt one's mind and emotions. As Caruth expressed in her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) that "there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive ... thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (p. 4).

As Lowen moves through the house, gathering belongings in preparation for its sale, she finds a hidden letter in Verity's room, reopening a wound she thought had been sealed the night Verity died. As Lowen begins reading it, she discovers a truth which demands recognition, Verity's truth which was silenced by murder. Verity starts the letter with an apology and explains, "After years of being the perfect wife to you, I never expected this career that I love and devote most of my time to would ultimately be what ended us" (Hoover, 2018, p. 194).

The letter Verity left was not only meant as a justification for writing the autobiography but also as an appeal for forgiveness and a testament to the power of words and therapeutic writing that would tie up loose ends and bridge the gap between appearances and reality, between a life spent on the run and a reconciliation of familial bonds and restoration of narrative closure. Nonetheless, for Lowen it was considered "a weapon that harnesses the power to destroy the life I've recently built with Jeremy" (p. 204), eventually deciding to silence the truth by "ripping each page into tiny shreds. I flush some of the paper and eat as many pieces of the letter I can find with Jeremy's name. I want to make sure no one ever reads a word of this" (p. 204).

In doing so, Lowen undergoes a psychological and moral descent, becoming the epitome of the woman she has long feared. Symbolically, Lowen erases Verity's voice a second time by ensuring that her narrative will never compete with the one she and Jeremy now share,

sealing her own psychological regression to murder and evil, a desire she claimed was meant in protecting the wellbeing of the man she presumably loved and a son whom she thought would be a good older brother to her child. Lowen thinks:

Jeremy would never forgive himself. Never. If he found out the manuscript wasn't real and that Verity never harmed Harper, he wouldn't be able to survive that kind of truth. The truth that he murdered his innocent wife. That we murdered his innocent wife.
(p.204)

Verity is a psychological thriller that not only challenges people's perception of trauma and recovery but the very moral compass of human psyche. The novel explores how the human mind adjusts in the face of deep loss. This psychological redirecting or adjustment, for both Lowen and Verity, paved a path of psychological rejuvenation, but at a price. For Lowen that price was not only silencing the voice of Verity's but that of her heart with its pleas for justice and meaning beyond evil or murder. By framing herself as Jeremy's protector and saviour, Lowen condescends into a world where her aimless life finally has meaning and where her needs are fulfilled, but with the price of having herself submit to trauma and subsequently sealing her fate with the words, "I brought light into his darkness, and I will continue to be that light so he'll never be lost in the shadows of his past" (p.205).

In contrast, Verity is one who sought to find meaning in her loss that was harmless and psychologically thriving. Unlike Lowen, Verity refused to succumb to the atrocious effects of trauma by incorporating writing as a medium to defend. In doing so, Verity rose above her circumstance by finding meaning amid chaos, one that defied the silence of the traumatic wound. However, her approach to writing had proved deadly when misunderstood by a man she considered the love of her life and a woman who, selfishly driven, silenced her voice. By presenting two different characters involved in the spectrum of trauma and recovery, Hoover

teaches a moral and valuable lesson; it is not trauma that defines what the true nature of the victims is, but rather it is the victims' choices and their need for articulating one's pain that defines the essence of recovery and psychological rebirth or their regressive downfall.

Herman argues that "The testimony of patients is eloquent on the point that recognition of the trauma is central to the recovery process" (p.127). Similarly, Verity's account of her past, which is manifested on paper through her biography, is a testimony to the power of words to give shape to unspeakable grief. Writing a biography proves how trauma victims long for maladaptive techniques to share and reflect on their anguish with brutal honesty. Following the same approach, Suzette A. Henke, in her book *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (1998), noted that "Testimonial life-writing allows the author to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression or victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone or no-one" (p. xix). By rehearsing and rewriting her emotions, Verity is able to achieve therapeutic emotional catharsis, reinforcing Henke's argument that "It is through the very process of rehearsing and reenacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis" (p. xix).

Chapter Four

Slam Poetry as a Mechanism of Trauma Disclosure in Hoover's

Slammed (2012)

Rudyard Kipling said that “Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind” (as cited in Taylor, 2017, p. vii). Throughout history, poetry, being a creative and stimulating medium of expression, has been used by many cultures, including indigenous tribes and the Ancient Greeks, as a means of cathartic release as well as a record of communal experience. In fact, the healing potential of poetry lies not only in its production or creation but, most astonishingly, in its consumption. As Audre Lorde, an American professor and poet, remarked, “Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundation for a future of change. A bridge across our fears of what has never been before” (as cited in Johnson, 2016, p. 41). “Those fears which rule our lives and form our silences” (p.41) when challenged by the power of poetry “begin to lose their control over us” (p.41).

Colleen Hoover's *Slammed* (2012) is a novel that explores the role of language in the process of healing. A poetic language which underlines the intricate and multilayered pieces of human psychology, brought to its profound representation through lyrical writing, as it traces the lives of Layken Cohen and Will Cooper, two characters overwhelmed by past traumas and misfortunes that challenge their relationship and love for one another. In their paper *Sudden Unexpected Death: Intervention with the Survivors* (1986), William Dubin and Jeffrey Sarnoff noted that “Grief represents the intense emotions and physical symptoms due to loss; mourning is the social expression of grief. The purposes of grief and mourning are to help people reconcile their loss and to attenuate their attachment to the deceased” (p.54). Notably, at the

age of seventeen, Layken's mourning begins unexpectedly when she receives news of her father's death, while she struggles to fathom the weight of such a tragic loss.

Moreover, Layken is denied her fair sum of mourning after making a transition; the loss forced the family into a financial crisis necessitating a stressful move from Texas to Michigan, leaving behind eighteen years of memories. Layken's grief and residential transition haunt the youngster who falls into tears the moment her mother delivers the news to her at school and, therefore, had to endure the excruciating weight of the first stages of grief, denial. Layken recounts the feelings she felt that day as she and her mother both collapsed on the floor, "Rather than hold her up, I simply melted with her. That day we experienced our first stage of grief in the hallway floor of my High School: Denial" (Hoover, 2012, p. 86). Six months later, as Layken and her brother Kel "load the last two boxes into the U-Haul. I slide the door down and pull the latch shut, locking up eighteen years of memories, all of which include my dad" (p. 7).

In her book *Denial: A Memoir of Terror* (2010), the American scholar Jessica Stern emphasized that "Some people's lives seem to flow in a narrative; mine had many stops and starts. That's what trauma does. It interrupts the plot... It just happens, and then life goes on. No one prepares you for it" (p.273-274). Layken's life narrative undergoes a traumatic break, unprepared for the loss of her father due to a heart attack. This experience overwhelms her to the extent that she is forced to conceal her emotional fragility, a natural human response to the adversities of life and death, doomed to be buried under the surface of emotional disguise, all for the sake of her mother and younger brother.

Pennebaker and Susman (1988) noted that "Over time, the work of inhibition serves as a low level but cumulative stressor. As with all cumulative stressors, inhibition over time is associated with increases in stress related diseases" (p.327). Similarly, Layken had to imprison her internal heartbreak and, in doing so, developed a sense of alienation that tore her apart. Layken had to endure psychological stress that led her to reflect on the contrast between her

previously stable and fulfilling life in Texas and the emotional turmoil she experienced after the loss:

My life back in Texas was simple. I had a routine, a great group of friends, a school I loved and even a home I loved. I cried a lot in the weeks following my father's death until I realized Kel and my mother would not be able to move on until I did. (Hoover,2012, p.49)

In their article *The Adolescent's Experience When a Parent has Advanced Cancer: A Qualitative Inquiry* (2015), Farya Phillips and Frances Lewis remarked that "The struggle with a parent's cancer can be very alarming for children and adolescents and often results in psychosocial problems such as "anxiety, confusion, sadness, anger, and feelings of uncertainty with respect to outcome of the illness" (p.852). Layken's psychological vulnerability is overgrown as she is confronted with another tragedy, an alarming impending loss of her mother, Julia. This confrontation reveals the heavy burden of unspoken truth on the family's dynamic and interaction.

Death casts its lingering shadow over Layken's life once again, as she faces an equally devastating trauma. She learns the real reason behind their relocation: her mother is dying of cancer. Upon hearing the truth, Layken recounts her feelings that day as she drops her head in her hands and starts crying, "It's amazing how many tears one person can have. One night after my father died, I had cried so much I started to become paranoid I was doing damage to my eyes" (Hoover, 2012, p. 132). As Layken processes her mother's words, she thinks:

She's so sick. How did I not notice? Her cheeks were even shallower than before. Her hair is thinner. I hardly recognize her. I've been so focused on my own misery that I haven't even noticed my own

mother being swept away right before my eyes... I'm really sick of crying. (p.132)

In their research on *Mental Health of Adolescents before and after the Death of a Parent or Sibling* (2015), Stikkelbroek and his colleagues noted that "The death of a parent or sibling during adolescence is a tragic...The majority of bereaved adolescents exhibit acute grief reactions, sleep problems, anger, irritability, and behavioural problem" (p.49). Learning about her mother's illness immediately sends Layken back into denial, anger, and bargaining, possibly all five stages of grief simultaneously. Layken's deepest point of rage manifests when her mother suggests giving custody of Kel to her friend Brenda, telling her out of pure concern, "Lake. You're still in high school, soon you'll be in college. I don't expect you to give everything up. I don't want you to. Brenda has raised children before. She wants to do it. Kel likes her" (Hoover, 2012, p. 133).

This fosters Layken's grief, adding another layer of depression to her injured psyche, as she feels tormented by the weight of her newly discovered reality. Layken realizes that "This moment, these words that have just come out of her mouth-I have never been more enraged" (p. 133). Layken's encounter with her mother, as emotionally charged as it was, reveals the intensity of emotional concealment, its consequences on the dynamics of familial relationships and the burden of months of unexhibited or shared psychological struggle, not only on Layken's part, but on her mother's as well.

In his thesis, *The Effects of Parental Loss Throughout Adolescent Stages of Development* (2005), Jade Spielman suggested that "losing a parent during late adolescence can feel like the loss of both parents instead of one" (p.31). Similarly, Layken's emotional decline is intensified not only by the loss of her caring father but, more tragically, by the shadow of death looming over her mother's terminal illness. Hence, driven by a sense of overwhelming responsibility and fear towards her small brother, Layken experiences a role

reversal of parenthood which unexpectedly throws her by surprise. This newly felt urge goes in line with Spielman's (2005) observation that "In addition to possibly becoming a "surrogate spouse" for the living parent, an adolescent can easily become a surrogate mother or father for younger siblings" (p.51).

He further adds, "Just as the late adolescent can now feel empathy for the surviving parent, he or she can also be worried about the younger sibling and want to be a replacement for the lost parent" (p.51). Layken's initial reaction to her mother's words is rage: "Of all the things I have been through this year. This moment, these words that have just come out of her mouth-I have never been more enraged" (Hoover, 2012, p.133). She throws the chair to the floor and angrily screams with a burning throat, "She is NOT getting Kel! You are not giving her MY brother!" (p.133).

In her article, *Who's to Blame? Perceived Responsibility for Spousal Death and Psychological Distress Among Older Widowed Persons* (2009), Deborah Carr asserted that "Deaths that involve the perceived violation of some moral or ethical standard are associated with elevated anger symptoms" (p.371). In the same vein, trauma haunts another character, Julia, as she feels a perceived responsibility for her spouse's death and experiences psychological distress that consumes her with anger and self-blame. Julia tells her daughter that her father died of a heart attack a week after he decided to move to Michigan to be closer to her doctor. As a result, Julia confesses, "I blamed myself-for your dad's heart attack. I knew it was the stress of the diagnosis that caused it" (Hoover, 2012, p. 132). This revelation encapsulates Julia's traumatic past and unaddressed grief, which led her to a state of "denial. I was angry. I was hoping for a miracle, I guess. I don't know. The days turned into weeks, then months. Now we're here. I started Chemotherapy again three weeks ago" (p. 132).

As Layken is left to meditate on the weight of her shocking new reality, another psychological struggle emerges that explains her poor state of mind, feeling emotionally

isolated in a new city without an emotional or accepting therapeutic setting. Van der Kolk (1987) contended that “The essence of psychological trauma is the loss of faith that there is order and continuity in life. Trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences” (p.31). For Layken, this mistrust in life’s order and meaning extends to include a shattered assumption of a divine reassurance as she questions the wisdom of having both her parents taken by death. Layken angrily thinks, “it’s like God has it out for us. Why both of them? Wasn’t my dad enough? It’s like death came and punched us square in the face” (Hoover, 2012, p. 132).

Moreover, Van der Kolk (1987) stressed that “Traumatized people have a poor tolerance for psychological and physiological arousal. Their usual response to stress consists of ...motoric discharge... and emotional withdrawal” (p.3). Layken’s emotional withdrawal, being a usual response to stress she confronts, produces episodes of motoric discharge, mainly rage and with it her grief intensifies, drowning her in the vicious cycle of trauma and psychological frustration.

Furthermore, Layken’s psychological struggle grows deeper as a man enters and transforms her life forever. Will Cohen, a twenty-one-year-old neighbor and high school teacher, becomes a vital piece in this grand narrative of loss and love, to which both characters unexpectedly succumb to. Similarly to Layken, Will Cooper’s trauma develops during adolescence as a result of sudden, profound losses and the early assumption of parental responsibility. Will’s life was irrevocably altered two years before meeting Layken when his parents were killed in a car accident. His brother was the only one who survived the tragedy, and consequently, Will became his sole guardian and supporter.

David Brent and his colleagues remarked in their research, *Longitudinal Effects of Parental Bereavement on Adolescent Developmental Competence* (2012), that “The loss of a parent is one of the most stressful events that a child can experience...parental bereavement is

rarely an isolated event, but instead often initiates a cascade of untoward consequences that increase family burden and adversity” (p.779). At the age of nineteen, Will’s psychological peace undergoes a stressful shock with the death of his parents. This pivotal moment in Will’s life not only took his family from him but also derailed his high-school education and his love life as well. Eddie, a young teenager whom Layken later befriends in school, reveals the emotional intensity of Will’s misfortune during his senior year in high school, telling Layken about Will’s girlfriend:

She dumped him. Two weeks after his parents were killed in a car wreck. He had a football scholarship but lost it when he had to move back home to take care of his little brother. Vaughn told everyone she wasn’t marrying a college dropout with a kid. So... He lost his parents, his girlfriend, his scholarship and became a guardian all in the same two week time frame. (Hoover,2012, p.108)

Moreover, other than suffering with the persistent emotional burden of being the sole guardian for his younger brother, Will is fuelled by the memory of his parents’ violent and unprepared deaths, and the knowledge that his brother, Caulder, witnessed such horrific tragedy. In alignment with Layken’s experience of emotional challenge, Will experience a forced role reversal for the sake of familial connection and fear of loss. However, this revelation leads Layken to admire Will’s sacrifices as a man who put other people’s needs before his own, making her meditate on the emotional depth of Will’s character as an older brother and a single parent, “I return my gaze out the window. I don’t want Eddie to see the tears welling up in my eyes. This...explains why he’s scared to take everything away from me, like it was taken from him” (p.108). She realizes that “All this time I’ve been assuming his feelings just aren’t as strong for me as mine are for him. Maybe I’m wrong” (p.108).

Following trauma, social attachments may become anxious and clinging, with idealization and a loss of psychological autonomy, or the trauma victim may suffer from interpersonal numbing. Van der Kolk (1987) noted that “a giving up of hope for satisfactory human contact” (p.153-154). In this novel, Colleen Hoover explores the painful consequences of trauma, which does not merely haunt the two main protagonists but also those whom they love. By weaving together lives of characters young and old, Hoover opens a window into the brutal aftermath of trauma, how it shatters connection, silences the spirit, and unravels the fragile threads that bind humans to one another. For instance, Caulder who stood helpless as he watched the light drain from his parents’ eyes. Will explains that “He was with them...when it happened. He watched them die” (Hoover, 2012, p.149). He Shockingly reveals that

They said it was a miracle he survived. The car was totaled. When the first person came on the scene, Caulder was still buckled up in what was left of the backseat. He was screaming my mom’s name, trying to get her to turn around. For five minutes he had to sit there alone and watch as they died. (p.150)

Following his parents’ death, Caulder was taken by his grandparents as his new lawful guardians. However, his attachment to Will remained hopelessly more enduring. Will remarks that his brother had cried the day his grandparents came to pick him up while begging his brother to take him instead, “He begged me to take him back to campus with me. I didn’t have a job, I didn’t have insurance. I was nineteen. I didn’t know the first thing about raising a kid...so I let them take him” (p.150).

Will had to question his life’s worth and love for his younger brother, and while running his fingers on the ball during a football game, he makes a decision that will prove to be psychologically challenging over time. Will contemplated, “This elongated spheroid shaped ball that didn’t even weigh a whole pound. I was choosing this ridiculous ball of leather in my

hands over my own flesh and blood” (p.150). Will adds, “I was putting myself, my girlfriend, my scholarship-I was putting everything before this little boy that I loved more than anything in the world” (p.150).

In psychological terms, “parentification is a pattern of family interactions when either a child or an adolescent accepts roles and obligations fulfilled by adults...parentification might constitute a factor which forms resilience and functional coping manners” (Borchet et al., 2016, p.116). Amidst loss and despair, Will decides to prioritize family above all personal and developmental opportunities, choosing instead to favor his own flesh and blood and setting aside his educational ambitions and love life to become the parent his brother needs.

For Will, such a decision is a coping mechanism that provides essence to a life challenged by death and loss. Hence, driven by compassion and love, Will heads to his grandparents’ home and grabs Caulder right out of bed. His grandparents, Will remarks, “begged me not to do it. Said it would be too hard on me and that I wouldn’t be able to give him what he needed. I knew they were wrong. I knew all Caulder really needed-was me” (Hoover,2012, p.150).

Two years later, Will and Layken cross paths when she and her family move in across the street. Will’s demeanor, close bond with his brother, and genuine interest in Layken sweep her off her feet the moment they meet. His voice “is smooth and soothing like my father’s was, but at the same time had an authoritative edge to it” (p.13), Layken thinks. The two fall in love with one another too quickly through a rapid and intense connection forged by shared emotional depth and the complex circumstances of their lives, which force them to drop their emotional guards quickly.

Shortly after meeting Will, Layken’s emotional wellbeing flourishes after a year of heartbreak and loss. Will quickly engages Layken, offering help with unloading, walking her home, and finally introducing her to his therapeutic world. In doing so, Will allowed her to

glimpse her father's image in him, an image long haunted by memories filled with warmth, love, and harmony she thought she had lost forever.

According to van der Kolk (2014), social support "is not the same as merely being in the presence of others. The critical issue is reciprocity: being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else's mind and heart" (p.79). He further explains, "For our physiology to calm down, heal, and grow we need a visceral feeling of safety" (p.79). Likewise, Layken feels emotionally guarded by Will's presence, ultimately leading her to feel welcomed and seen in a world that was previously devoid of meaning and psychologically distressing.

After enduring a pitiful fall where she slips on the snow-dusted concrete outside her new home in Michigan, Will helps her up, tends to her needs at his home, and bandages her wounds. His father-like figure brings Layken back into reconciliation with her memory of her lost father, which feels no more traumatising but rather invigorating by Will's compassion and gracefulness. While drinking from a cup of coffee that Will offers, Layken reassuringly thinks "I look at the cup before taking another sip and notice the big letters emblazoned on the side. World's Greatest Dad. It's the exact same cup my father used to drink coffee from" (Hoover, 2012, p.15).

Building a healing relationship is one of Herman's indicators of trauma recovery. According to her, the two main symptoms of psychological trauma are alienation and disempowerment. Therefore, the foundation of recovery is the survivor's empowerment and the development of new relationships with others. Herman argued that "recovery from trauma can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (p.133). She further stated that, "In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These

faculties include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy” (p.133).

In the same vein, Will’s sense of humour and physical bonding feel captivating for an emotionally isolated and broken soul such as Layken, who longs for connection and empathetic witness to her pain and for one who restores a sense of trust, intimacy and initiative in her that were lost due to trauma. Layken shows such sentiment as Will “listens intently, interrupting only to instruct me when and where to turn” (Hoover, 2015, p.19). Layken thinks:

I’m not sure why, but as we talk, I tell him the entire story about my dad...about our passion for music...how my father died suddenly and extremely unexpectedly of a heart attack...about my eighteenth birthday and the concert we never made it to. I don’t know why I keep talking, but I can’t seem to shut myself up. I never divulge information so freely, especially to people I barely know. (p.19)

Layken’s attraction to Will grows significantly higher as he walks her into a world of literal metaphors and emotional vulnerabilities, a world where each pain is celebrated and shared, both physically on stage and emotionally across people’s hearts and minds; that world is of slam poetry.

Slam poetry originated in the mid-1980s by Marc Kelly Smith, an American poet and founder. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (2005), the American author Susan Willett expressed that “slam is a phenomenon that has captured America’s popular imagination” (p. 51). Slam poetry is a style of live, performance-based poetry in which poets present original work and are judged by the audience or selected judges. In their article *The Benefits of Writing and Performing in the Spoken Word Poetry Community* (2014), Nadia Alvarez and Jack Mearns explained that “The

element of being judged by audience members encourages poets to create work that the general public will relate to, catalyzing a forum for shared experience” (p.263).

Slam poetry emphasizes emotion, personal storytelling, voice, and stage presence. “Slam poetry is performance poetry, the marriage of text and the artful presentation of spoken words onstage to an audience that has permission to talk back and let the poet performer know whether he or she is communicating effectively” (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p.8-9). In her article, *The Resolution of Internal Conflict Through Performing Poetry* (2009), the American psychologist Cheryl J. Maddalena emphasised that “poetry slam has many similarities to poetry therapy, including the opportunity for transformation, but poetry slam provides a very different level of containment and safety compared to a poetry therapy” (p.232). Slam poetry typically addresses several social issues, such as identity, love, politics, trauma, and empowerment

On their first date together, Layken is escorted to a club where slam poetry is performed and as Layken questions the meaning of slam, Will remarks ““It’s poetry,”he says as he smiles at me. “It’s what I’m all about.”” (Hoover,2012, p.30). Humans are inherently social and interconnected, rather than isolated. Poetry is a medium that transcends personal limits, transforming particular stories into universal truths of a shared experience. This club, as Will explains, is a place where “People get up there and pour their hearts out just using their words and the movement of their bodies” (p.30). The club of slam poetry represents a safe haven for broken souls who dare to articulate their past painful experiences of trauma and the magnitude of their emotion whether love, loss, pain or survival.

This safe and embracing community is one that aligns with Herman’s observation of the first stage in trauma recovery, which is establishing a sense of safety. Herman (2015) asserted that the central stage in the “recovery from trauma is the establishment of safety” (p.155). She also stressed that

Trauma robs the victim of a sense of power and control; the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor.

The first task of recovery is to establish the survivor's safety. This task takes precedence over all others, for no other therapeutic work can possibly succeed if safety has not been adequately secured.

(p.159)

The second stage of trauma recovery for Herman is remembrance and mourning, or in other words, the reconstruction of trauma narrative through the telling of one's story completely and in detail. Herman contended that "this work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (p.175). As Layken finds her way into the club, she encounters her first ever exposure to the poetic language of words, a traumatic narrative of young woman whose painful past of interpersonal violence by a man she thought she loved has led to her miscarriage.

The poem entitled "Blue Sweater" illustrates how trauma is encoded, processed, and ultimately externalized through narrative reconstruction, revealing the therapeutic potential of spoken-word poetry for survivors of interpersonal violence. The poem begins with the words "Bom Bom... Bom Bom... Bom Bom... Do you hear that? (Her voice lingering on the word hear) That's the sound of my heart beating" (Hoover, 2012, p.32). She goes on, "It was the same sweater you said made my eyes look like reflections of the stars on the ocean" (p.32).

Remembering a traumatic experience is painful and sharing it often means returning to the past and experiencing strong emotions all over. Yet, Ingrid Betancourt (2010) contended, "But sharing is also your way out because every time you tell your story, you can distance yourself from it, take a step back and you learn to remember without reliving, and begin to recover" (p.14). Similarly, in attending and performing among several others who are empathetic and supportive to one's suffering and pain, the audience, including Layken and

Will, and the performers experience an intense emotional bond with one another that challenges the isolative nature of traumatic experience.

Trauma breaks linear time and the performer's use of rhythmic "Bom Bom" to indicate the intensity of her heartbeat reflects the cyclical, intrusive nature of traumatic memory. The sensory details become fixed points around which the survivor's recollection continually turns. The young woman reveals, "The SAME sweater you RIPPED off of my body as you shoved me to the floor, calling me a whore, telling me you didn't love me anymore" (Hoover, 2012, p.33). Layken observes as she listens, (There is a long silence as she clasps her hands to her stomach, tears streaming down her face) Do you hear that? Of course you don't. That's the silence of my womb. Because you RIPPED OFF MY SWEATER!" (p.34).

"the silence of my womb" marks a pivotal moment where trauma had previously annihilated language, yet the use of poetry to articulate the unimaginable pain the woman felt helped her to reclaim her narrative agency through slam poetry. This kind of poetic remembering and mourning functions as a mode of storytelling that helps survivors vocalize their traumatic experiences, transforming them from private suffering to collective witnessing.

As the performer finishes her poem, Layken cannot help but feel entranced by what she heard. She identifies with a stranger whose emotional vulnerability has been far-reaching, touching every listener and broken soul present at this theatrical and poetic display of emotional empowerment. The very act left Layken speechless and emotionally oscillating, as she feels that three days ago, "I was devastated, bitter, hopeless. Today I woke up feeling happy for the first time in months. I feel vulnerable. I try to mask my emotions but I feel like everyone knows what I'm thinking and feeling" (p.35). The act has led Layken to appreciate her untold feelings for Will and the stress she feels of having to hold up her feelings of love and belonging, which she no longer can mask. Layken confesses, "I feel like I'm up on the stage, pouring my heart out to him, and it scares the hell out of me" (p.35).

Poetry's "honesty helps people to explore difficult issues. When participants hear a group member . . . speak from the heart, they become more willing to do so themselves" (Reiter, 1997, p. 173). For Layken, poetry becomes a vehicle for self-discovery. By witnessing others reveal themselves, she becomes aware of her emotional needs and vulnerability. Moreover, she becomes intrigued to step into that world herself, mesmerized by the power it contains to unleash the screams of a wound long sealed by time and the fear of sharing which traumatic experiences typically enforce upon their victims.

Layken thinks that "poetry is as vast and electrifying as the audience. I have never laughed and cried so much" (Hoover, 2012, p.35). Amazed by the performances, Layken realizes that "The way these poets were able to lure you into a whole new world, viewing things from a vantage point you have never seen before" (p.35). Every poetic performance Layken witnesses resonates deeply with her, making her feel connected with

the mother who lost her baby, or the boy who killed his father, or even the man who got high for the first time and ate five plates of bacon. I feel a connection with these poets and their stories. More so, I feel a deeper connection to Will. I can't imagine that he's brave enough to get up on the stage and bare his soul like these people are doing. (p.35)

Poetry, with its metaphors and symbolic language, allows for an array of expressions that can contain the intricacies of trauma and give voice to painful events that may otherwise remain indescribable. By engaging in a metaphoric world, survivors are able to own their stories of loss and pain and proclaim their victory over the silence of traumatic experience, choosing instead to explore the power of human resistance in the face of atrocities. In her book *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (2010), the American author Brené Brown offered a similar point of view by asserting

that “Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it...Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light” (p.6). In the same vein, as Will takes on the stage of slam poetry, he processes his trauma regarding the tragic loss of his parents by confronting the vicious cycle of life and death, which not only claims the lives of loved ones but the happiness and wellbeing of those affected by the loss.

For many trauma victims, naming their pain and loss by articulating it can be liberating because “the wall of silence which keeps a victim an isolated prisoner is broken down by naming the violence” (Bail, 1998, p. 242). Similarly, by writing his piece and reciting it on stage, Will forces himself to look directly at death, something he says most people avoid. Confronting the universality and unavoidability of death, Will opens his poem with the words, “Death. The only thing inevitable in life” (Hoover, 2012, p.36). For most people, death is a sensitive topic which they avoid since “They don’t want to imagine how life will go on without them” (p.36). Nevertheless, Will remarks, “All the people they love will briefly grieve but continue to breathe... all the people they love will briefly grieve but continue to breathe...Their children will still grow / Get married / Get old...Their material things will be sold / Their medical files stamped ‘closed’ / Their name becoming a memory” (p.36).

His next lines shift from reflection to trauma. Death is no longer an idea, it is an event. The metaphor of death being “disguised” shows how unexpected and undeserved his parents’ death felt. The fog suggests confusion, obscurity, and the shock of having no warning: “Instead they were met head-on by death, disguised as an eighteen-wheeler behind a cloud of fog” (p.37). While others avoid thinking about death, Will confronts death directly and examines it through poetry, acknowledging his parents’ lack of preparation and the consequences of that for him and his younger brother:

I may have legally been considered an adult at the age of nineteen, but I still felt very much all of just nineteen. Unprepared and overwhelmed to suddenly have the entire life of a seven-year-old in my realm. Death. The only thing inevitable in life. (p.37)

According to van der Kolk (2014), “language gives us the power to change ourselves and others by communicating our experiences, helping us to define what we know, and finding a common sense of meaning” (p.38). Through poetic language, Will is able to define and make sense of his traumatic experience, and his production inspires others to relate and feel connected with one who shares similar experience, and by extension, articulate years of unaddressed grief or traumatic stress. His emotional unburdening makes Layken think, “I wipe tears away with the back of my hand. I don’t know if I’m crying for the loss of Will’s parents, the responsibilities of that loss or the simple fact that he spoke the truth” (Hoover, 2012, p.38).

Will’s performance and words resonate deeply with Layken’s own experiences of life and death. This shared familiarity with pain forms an instant emotional bridge between them which leads her to feel, “He spoke about a side of death and loss that never seems to be considered until it’s too late. A side that I’m unfortunately all too familiar with” (p.38). Will’s poetry reopened Layken’s wounded past, however, it also created admiration and attraction. Layken remarks, “The Will I watched walk up to the stage is not the same Will I’m watching walk toward me. I’m conflicted, I’m confused, and most of all I’m taken aback. He was beautiful” (p.38).

However, this promising love, characterised by instant attraction, shared passion, emotional vulnerability, and intense physical tension, comes at halt the moment their love life is threatened by unexpected circumstances. Stefania Mancone and her colleagues stressed in their research on *Emotional and Cognitive Responses to Romantic Breakups in Adolescents and Young Adults: The Role of Rumination and Coping Mechanisms in Life Impact* (2025) that

“Romantic breakups are significant stressors that disrupt emotional well-being, cognitive processing, and social functioning” (p.2). As Layken enlists in her new high school, she and Will are shocked to discover that he will be her poetry teacher. This revelation suddenly creates an emotional vacuum between the two.

Will’s responsibility towards his younger brother’s wellbeing forces him to break his attachment to Layken which sends the two into depressive episodes of denial and repressed love. Layken recounts her feelings that day, “I’m so angry at him. At the entire situation. I can’t discern if I’m really just upset about what has happened today, or my entire life this year...To hear him tell me that we can’t even be friends hurts” (Hoover,2012, p.52). she further thinks, “It scares me that I’ll go back to who I’ve been for the past six months; someone I’m not proud of” (p.52).

However, poetry serves as a thread that connects the newly separate worlds of Layken and Will. And as Layken spends more time in Will’s class, her infatuation with Will grows thicker. Will’s poetry and his ardent love for language touch not only Layken’s heart but also the hearts of many of his students. Brené Brown (2012) argued that “Connection is why we’re here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering” (p.8). Will’s next poetic piece addresses the weight of expectations and the feeling of being suffocated by pressure, a sentiment that many teenagers relate to and connect with as they navigate familial demands for success and the expectation of excellence in high school.

Above all, it is a piece that reveals his confinement to secrecy and the toll it takes on him as he and Layken navigate their feelings of heartbreak. Will begins his poem with the lines, “Expectations, evaluations, internal evasions Fly out of me like puddles of blood from a wound A fetus from the womb of a corpse in a tomb Withered and strewn like red sheets on the bed Of an immaculate room” (Hoover, 2012, p.61). Throughout poetry, Will expressed his sense

of suffocation and emotional paralysis as Will adds, “I can’t breathe, I can’t win, From this indelible position I’m in It controls the only piece of my unfortunate soul Left... like a prisoner in An unlocked cell sitting in the deepest pits of hell” (p.61).

In his article *The Meaning of Poetry Therapy as Art and Science: Its Essence, Religious Quality, and Spiritual Values* (1997), Hirsch Silverman stated that “The beauty of poetry lies in its healing influence... the writing of poems in itself provides deep insight into problems of the individual, in the process objectifying them in ways unexplainable but cathartic” (p.49). He further adds, “For the written word is a powerful tool as image or metaphor; and the language of poetry is the utter language of the preconscious and the subconscious” (p.49).

In his English class, Will instructs each student to write a short poem of about ten sentences that they would perform in front of the class the following day. However, this assignment proves to be essential in understanding the reason why people write poetry. The next day Will hands each student a different poem written by their fellow students asking them to score each paper from one to ten. And as students finish their scoring, Eddie, a friend of Layken, asks, “Some of us who wrote those poems may not want to know how many points we got. I know I don’t” (Hoover, 2012, p.145).

In his book *Coping With Trauma: Hope Through Understanding* (2008), psychiatry professor Jon Allen asserted that “talking about the trauma in an emotional way provides the opportunity to be heard by someone” (p.252). Will’s response to Eddie underscores the cathartic nature of poetry and the need for empathetic witness to one’s pain and feelings. Hence, Will’s class becomes a theatrical platform for witnessing the shared experiences of human struggle and the resistance of those affected by it. Will takes a few steps towards Eddie and asks her, “If you don’t care how many points it’s worth, then why did you write it?” (Hoover, 2012, p.145). Eddie’s response summarises the connectedness of human experience and the need for social attachment as she utters the words, “I guess because I had something to

say” (p.145). Will argues that the human race is driven by passion, echoing Allan Wolf’s words: “The points are not the point; the point is poetry” (p. 145). Will adds “It shouldn’t matter what anyone else thinks about your words. When you’re on that stage-you share a piece of your soul. You can’t assign points to that” (p.146).

Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (2009) argued that “reconstructing the trauma into a narrative form is one of the most crucial processes in the journey towards healing of the victim” (p.26). Poets who share their pain through poetic narrative and performance learn to share part of their souls with others and, by extension, develop a sense of mastery over their feelings by creating their own voice which confronts the traumatic silence imposed by atrocities. Similarly, “Poetry releases one from the world of the particular into the healing ambience of the universal. To one suffering from a sense of alienation, the awareness that another’s steps have preceded him on the same lonesome road is comforting” (Morrison, 1969, p.89).

Furthermore, “Poets expressing their deepest fears, insecurities, and anxieties give voice to what we feel deepest within ourselves” (Morrison, 1969, p.89). Poetry helps individuals move past their personal boundaries, turning growth into a mindful and empowering process. Similarly, As Layken meditates writing poetry in her room, Julia teaches her a valuable lesson, telling her to “Push your boundaries, Lake. That's what they’re there for” (Hoover, 2012, p.158).

However, for many people with an emotional past and traumatising memories the act of revisiting their memories through writing can be a reliving of pain. This idea is thwarted by one of Will’s students, Gavi, who thinks that “People are free to write what they want to write about. But the thing that bothers me is, what if the person who writes it doesn’t want to relive it?” (p.161). The American psychiatrist Milton Berger (1969) suggested that “poetry, created or used during the psychotherapeutic encounter, can often help a patient to reach levels of

emotional insight more adequately than conventional dialogue” (p.75). Moreover, he contended “It enriches the encounter by allowing the patient to identify with other human beings, who have experienced similar conflicts, anxieties, and feelings, and who have been able to state, for all humanity, a universal theme or dilemma” (P.75).

In the same vein, Will stresses that once a poem leaves the writer’s hands, its emotional purpose shifts. Writing poetry means allowing oneself to be vulnerable not because one wants sympathy, but because their honesty might give someone else the strength or clarity they desperately need. Will wrote the name of a musical band and band and explains that they were asked the same question, “Their reply was, that although they had ideally moved beyond that- from the person or event that inspired their words at that point in time, it doesn’t mean someone listening to them wasn’t in that” (Hoover, 2012, p.162). Will adds:

what if the heartache you wrote last year isn’t what you’re feeling
today. It may be exactly what the person in the front row is feeling.
What you’re feeling now, and the person you may reach with your
words five years from now-that’s why you write poetry. (p.162)

In sharing poetry with others, “individuals come to realize the lessening of aloneness in their own lives” (Silverman, 1997, p. 51). The American psychotherapist Gideon A. Schloss noted in his book *Psychopoetry* (1976) that poetry holds transformative and healing power: “Sometimes writing a poem may have seemed the only means of dissipating loneliness, depression, or despair...in finding the right words to express their feelings, they gained a sense of accomplishment...experienced a transformation of personal pain into aesthetic pleasure” (p. 1). Will shows his students the poem about his parents’ death and explains that he wrote this piece two years ago, “I was angry. I was hurt. I wrote down exactly what I was feeling. When I read it now, I don’t share those same feelings. Do I regret writing it? No. Because there’s a

chance that someone in this very room may relate to this. It might mean something to them” (Hoover, 2012, p.162).

As Will reinterprets each line of his poem, Layken experiences a powerful emotional shift leading her to reevaluate her feelings towards her dying mother as she moves from fear and fixation on her mother’s impending death to recognizing the significance of the life her mother still has. Layken realises

I get it. In the first line, when you said that death was the only thing inevitable in life...you emphasized the word death. But when you said it again at the end of the poem...you emphasized the word life...You’re right. She’s not trying to prepare us for her death. She’s trying to prepare us for her life. For what she has left of it. (p.162)

Herman’s third stage of recovery is reconnection. Once the survivor has grieved the loss of the self shattered by trauma, they are confronted with the task of rebuilding a new life. His or “her relationships have been tested and forever changed by the trauma; now she or he must develop new relationships” (p.196). Herman adds, “The old beliefs that gave meaning to her life have been challenged; now she must find anew a sustaining faith” (p.196). Layken feels reconnected to life through Will and the lessons she has learned from him, her old beliefs about life and death are shattered by a new sustaining faith in humanity and discovered resiliency.

Empowered by the magic of words and emotional celebration, Layken is “ready to take concrete steps to increase her sense of power and control, to protect herself against future danger, and to deepen her alliances with those whom she’ has learned to trust” (Herman, 2012, p.197). Layken confesses, “I can honestly say I feel like I’ve moved through the five stages of grief in every aspect of my life. I have accepted my father’s death. I accepted his death ... I’ve accepted my mother’s fate” (Hoover, 2012, p.175). She adds, “I realize she hasn’t even died

yet, and that the stages of grief will once again recommence when she does. But I know it won't be as hard" (p.175).

Layken's intense, unreciprocated attachment to Will functions as the final unresolved element in her therapeutic recover. Herman suggested that "Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery" (p.179). Their relationship, which is silenced by circumstances and familial sacrifice, marks the core of Layken and Will's empowering union. Her love for Will is reignited and all-consuming as her mother explains that Will has told her the night he discovered her diagnosis with cancer that "he would never take you from me. He said he was going to let you go...let you focus on me and on the time I had left" (Hoover,2012, p.201). Conveniently, Julia urges Layken to consider the fact that she has been ignoring her heart completely emphasizing that "There has to be a balance. The fact that both of you are letting other things consume you is about to ruin any chance you'll ever have at being happy" (p.201).

Notably, Herman viewed commonality as a restorative counterforce to trauma and as a primary antidote to trauma's isolating power. She noted that "The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience... Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms" (p.214). Throughout her journey and through her interactions with Will, her friend Eddie, her family, and others whose experiences were expressed through aesthetic and poetic art, Layken comes to understand the importance of feeling a sense of familiarity with others, of being truly known, and of experiencing communion.

Herman concluded that "The survivor who has achieved commonality with others can rest from her labors. Her recovery is accomplished; all that remains before her is her life" (p.236). The final scene of Hoover's novel traces an act of empowerment and a celebration of Layken's long repressed love and a testament to the potential of trauma victims to voice their

courage in the face of long imposed silence as Layken finds her way on the stage of slam poetry.

Her piece entitled “Schooled” summarises the impact of everyone she has met and the lessons she has learned that helped her reconstruct the narrative of her life. Beginning with her mother: “I got schooled this year. By a cancer patient ... I got schooled this year. By a cancer patient...She taught me to question. To never regret. She taught me to push my boundaries, Because that's what they're there for” (Hoover, 2012, p.206). Followed by her teacher, “I got schooled this year By my teacher He taught me That the points are not the point, The point is poetry” (p.206). Her best friend Eddie whom she considers family; “She taught me to respect the hand that I was dealt. And to be grateful I was even dealt a hand. She taught me that family Doesn't have to be blood. Sometimes your family are your friends” (p.206-207).

Finally, she concludes her poem by acknowledging the man who now occupies her heart and mind, “I got schooled this year by a Boy. a boy that I'm seriously, deeply, madly, incredibly, and undeniably in love with. And he taught me the most important thing of all...To put the emphasis On life” (p.208). In writing and expressing her passion on stage, Layken restores decency and claims control over her emotions, reauthoring her life's narrative and empowered by a deep instinct for psychological thriving. This tendency echoes Herman's conclusion that “the survivor ‘must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery. Others may offer advice, support, assistance, affection, and care, but not cure” (p.133).

Conclusion

Traumatic experiences have the potential to reshape the mind and the way the self and the world, by extension, are viewed. These experiences do not stem from a single incident; rather, they accumulate over time and resistance to speech. Gradually, the tendency of trauma survivors to withhold sharing their pain and intense emotional oscillation acts as active stressors that prevent their recovery. The story of trauma is a story of past versus present, of traumatic memories that haunt the survivors, and of a desperate need to forget. For many trauma survivors, remembering feels like reliving the dreadful experience of loss, and a break in their linear flow of time and life narratives. However, the presence of a listener is crucial for trauma survivors because it enables the articulation of painful memories, transforming private suffering into a shared and acknowledged experience that can initiate emotional processing and healing

Furthermore, the resistance to reconcile with the past and the calamity of loss only entraps survivors in a loop of traumatic remembering. Hence, disclosure emerges as a means to re-open the wounds of the past and a path to mediate the consequences of traumatic injuries and emotional pasts. The characters in Hoover's novels, whether *Confess*, *Verity*, or *Slammed*, have to endure loss in different forms. Yet their road to recovery is achieved not in isolation, but through their defiance of forgetfulness and their attempts to reconnect with others. In *Confess*, Auburn's and Owen's emotional decline and past traumas are so overwhelming that they become entrapped in a vicious cycle of traumatic remembrance and self-loathing for many years.

However, as their paths cross and their stories are shared through the aesthetic space of art and confessional writing, empathetic human connection and emotional bonding are restored. The love and resilience of a mother who experiences traumatic loss and goes as far as to put her son's future and needs before her own captivate another human being whose struggle with

loss is not much different from hers. Owen's guilt and constant attempts to redeem what he considers a sinful act of inexperience are active stressors that hinder his therapeutic recovery. Despite these challenges, Owen's studio, with its artworks and confessional writings, acts as both an aesthetic space and a therapeutic setting that processes and acknowledges the wounds of the past.

By drawing the horrors endured by trauma victims, including himself, and the emotional complexities of the present, Owen is able to transform once unspeakable feelings of pain and loss and reshape them into colourful representations that demonstrate the often unnoticeable yet formidable aspects of human resilience in the face of traumatic terror. Similarly, Hoover's novel *Verity* defies the silence of trauma through writing and the readjustment of the linear timeline. Verity, who considers herself responsible for her daughter's death, finds reconciliation in addressing the darker yet innate voice of evil that haunts the human mind. By engaging in a form of journaling known as antagonistic journaling, Verity is able to confront her negative feelings with a literary twist; pouring her guilt and anger onto paper feels exhilarating and ultimately proves cathartic and emotionally cleansing.

By projecting the blame onto a fictional villainous version of herself in her autobiography, she eases the burden of her real-life grief. Writing enables Verity to undergo a process of emotional compartmentalization, a psychological defense mechanism in which individuals separate conflicting thoughts and feelings into distinct mental spaces in order to manage them more effectively. It allows her to distinguish between her reality and her fiction. She discovers psychological relief in completing a chapter and shutting her laptop, effectively closing the door on the evil she creates. Finally, Hoover's novel *Slammed* explores another form of traumatic disclosure, namely poetic writing. Trauma often leaves victims verbally paralyzed. Will and Layken both suffer life-altering losses that they are initially unable to articulate through ordinary conversation.

However, poetry creates a safe distance between the survivor and the trauma. For Will, writing a poem about his parents' death allows him to look back at his former self without being consumed by the same emotions. His poem helps him confront the inevitability of life's end without becoming emotionally overwhelmed. Additionally, writing poetry serves as a means of venting emotional distress and celebrating diverse traumatic experiences that are shared on stage and admired. By engaging with others whose traumatic experiences are no longer repressed but instead expressed poetically before an empathetic audience, both Will and Layken come to understand the essence of poetic writing: sharing a piece of one's heart with others and recognizing the interconnectedness of human experience and suffering.

Moreover, writing poetry becomes a means of celebrating love and transformation, as it helps Layken and Will share their feelings for one another and the lessons learned throughout their journey. This ultimately leads them to grasp that traumatic recovery is not completed in isolation, but through connection with an empathetic other. By recording and engaging in different forms of expression, whether writing confessions, creating artworks, participating in oral performances, or composing autobiographical narratives, the characters were able to move beyond the fear of reliving traumatic experiences toward a world in which they celebrate their struggles and resilience in the face of adversity.

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المستخلص

في عصرٍ يُنَّسَم بحساسيةٍ نفسيةٍ متناميةٍ وتحولاتٍ عالميةٍ متسارعةٍ، يغدو استقصاء السؤال الجوهري المتعلق بالاعتلالات النفسية الناتجة عن الصدمة وسبل التعافي منها ضرورةً علميةً ملحةً تستدعي تضافر الجهود بين الدراسات الطبية والأدبية لفحص أسباب هذه الجراح النفسية ونتائجها، واستكشاف إمكانات النمو النفسي المنبثق عنها. وانطلاقاً من هذا المنظور، تتبنى هذه الأطروحة موقفاً نقدياً من النزعة إلى كتمان الألم المتولد عن الصدمة، مؤكدةً أن الصدمة ليست جرحاً يُوارى، بل تجربة تقتضي الإفصاح والتعبير.

ويتجلى هذا التعبير عبر أنماط سردية متعددة، من بينها الاعتراف المجهول، والتمثيل الفني، والإفصاح الشعري، والانخراط السيري الذاتي مع تجارب الماضي والحاضر. وتعتمد الدراسة على الإسهامات النظرية البارزة في حقل دراسات الصدمة، مستفيدةً من أطروحات عددٍ من أبرز منظري هذا المجال ومنهم جوديث هيرمان، بيسيل فان دير كولك، دوري لاب وجيسمس بنبيكر ممن بحثوا الأبعاد السردية للصدمة، والعلاقة المعقدة ما بين التجربة الصادمة والذاكرة وآليات التعبير عنها، وذلك من خلال تحليل روايات مختارة للكاتبة كولين هوفر.

وقد أظهرت النتائج وجود إمكانات تطهيرية وعلاجية كامنة في مشاركة التجارب الصادمة مع آخرين ممن عانوا ماضياً صادمًا لا يقل اضطراباً وإن اختلف في طبيعته. ومن خلال العثور على ذواتٍ متعاطفة وداعمة، استطاعت شخصيات روايات هوفر أن تختبر تحوُّلاً نفسياً وشعوراً متنامياً بالاقتدار دفعها إلى إعادة تشكيل السردية الكبرى لحياتها وإعادة تأليفها. وعليه، تفيد هذه الدراسة بأن صياغة الألم والمخاوف ضمن بنية سردية تمكّن الأفراد المتأثرين بالصدمة من بلوغ المصالحة الداخلية واكتشاف سرديات حياتية بديلة أكثر إنتاجية، بما يسهم في تحقيق الشفاء وتعزيز التعافي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التكيف الفني، التطهير، المشاركة الجماعية، العلاج بالسرد، الإفصاح عن الصدمة



جمهورية العراق
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قسم اللغة الانكليزية وآدابها

الاعتراف والتطهير: الإفصاح عن الصدمة في روايات مختارة لكولين هوفر

رسالة تقدم بها

علي عبد الجليل محمد

الى مجلس كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية في جامعة واسط كجزء من متطلبات نيل

شهادة الماجستير في الأدب الانكليزي

بإشراف

الأستاذ الدكتور ازهار حميد منخي