

Trauma and Narrative in *The Uninvited*

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Abstract

Due to the incomprehensibility of trauma and its consequent devastating results on trauma victims, there are debates on the possibility of narrating trauma. But by fiction, what cannot be represented by conventional historical, cultural and autobiographical narrative can be represented. This article approaches the film *The Uninvited* from the prospective of trauma and narrative studies. Taking the film, *The Uninvited* as a literary text, this article examines how the film mirrors the mind of trauma victims and how the trauma narrative was presented by literary devices such as internal focalization, intertextuality, ghost, flashbacks, etc.

Key words: Trauma; Narrative; *The Uninvited*

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INTRODUCTION

The Uninvited is an American horror film and a remake of the South Korean horror film *A Tale of Two Sisters*. It shows the life of a trauma-suffering girl who accidentally killed her mother and sister, but because of her loss of memory about the traumatic event she begins her revenge and kills her step-mother-to-be. This article tries to examine how the film mirrors the mind of trauma victims and how trauma narrative was presented by literary devices such as the internal focalization, intertextuality, ghost, flashbacks, etc.

Trauma is defined as “an experience in which an individual is directly involved in or witnesses an event which evokes feelings of a loss of safety, helplessness, intense fear, horror, and a threat of annihilation” (Herman 2001:1). In the treatment of trauma victims, one of the concerns is the function of narrative in the recovery of trauma victims. To heal trauma, the victims must understand what really happened in the past, thus narrating the trauma becomes essential for the trauma victims. But for the trauma victims, trauma seems unrepresentable because a traumatic event such as the Holocaust is “an event that stretched the powers of the moral imagination beyond the potential for understanding, witnessing, and judging” (Ball, 2000, p.10). The same argument is put forward by Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, and Caruth explains “For the survivor of trauma, the truth of the event may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrences defy simple comprehension” (1996, p.153).

Then two questions arise: if trauma is incomprehensible, can trauma be narrated? If trauma can be narrated, then how can it be represented in literature due to its unrepresentable, inexpressible and unassimilable characters? For Anne Whitehead, “by the very nature of its creativity, innovation, literary devices and techniques, fiction is able to represent what ‘cannot be represented by conventional historical, cultural and autobiographical narratives’” (2004, p.83). In *Trauma Fiction*, Whitehead explains: “Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (2004, p.3). Whitehead’s point is that trauma can be represented by literary text, but trauma literature is different in its form and writing techniques. The traditional linear narrative is replaced by nonlinear narrative in trauma literature as it aims to mimic

the symptoms of trauma victims to let readers have a deeper understanding of trauma. *The Uninvited* is a typical example of trauma literature/film and this article tries to put it in the framework of trauma and literary studies to examine trauma and narrative in the film.

1. SHOWING TRAUMA

Clearly Anna is a trauma victim. When she is at the party with her boyfriend Matt, Anna wants to go home to take care of her sick mother. When she gets home, she cannot find her father. Catching her father and her mother's caretaker--Rachel are having sex, Anna becomes enraged and fills a watering can from a large gasoline tank in the boathouse and carries it towards the house, intending to burn it down. But Anna's memory stops there and she can neither remember what happened next nor figure out what caused the accident. Caruth termed the structure of trauma as the interruption of time or history, which means the traumatic event was not absorbed and experienced at the beginning, instead it is kind of "belatedness" (Caruth, 1995, p.11). The belatedness and afterward-ness make the victim of trauma be fixed at certain "time point" of the past. For Anna, the time point is the moment prior to the explosion.

Freud first points out this kind of belatedness by saying that "it may happen that someone gets away from, apparently unharmed, the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which one can ascribe only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a traumatic neurosis" (Freud, 1939, p.109). The belatedness of Anna's traumatic experience comes later, even being released after ten months in the psychiatric institution; Anna still suffers from the traumatic event and exhibits all the traumatic symptoms.

Ana got her traumatic neurosis when she lost her mother and sister. Suffering from guilt and regret, she tried to commit suicide, then she was sent to the psychiatric institution. Just like what Anna told Doctor Silberling, she had constant dreams of what happened that night, but her memory stopped at the moment of the explosion no matter how hard she tried to recall. She dreamed of the ghost in the woods on her way home, her mother's bell, the scattered dishes and bird on the dining table, and the blood comes from the keyhole. After being released from the institution, she is haunted by the ghost of her mother, her boyfriend Matt and the ghosts of those three children killed by Mildred Kemp in reality. The unspeakable dream is not the only thing that haunts Anna, the lost memory and the continuing reminder of the bell haunts Anna as well. Every time she sees the bell, she thinks of her mother and will act in a terrified way.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes the symptoms of trauma-suffering veterans as "the impression they give is of being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some 'daemonic' power" (Freud 1963, p.16). Anna is haunted by her tragic fate and driven by her daemonic power, she seems to repeat what she has done before for her unassimilated traumatic experience. According to Caruth, Anna's behavior proves that "the event was not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth, 1995, pp.4-5). The result shows that the main character has depression that influences her personality and makes her more hallucinating (Lesmanawati, 2018).

Anna was possessed by the explosion and possessed "daemonic" power as her only concentration of her life was the explosion and finding out the murderer for her mother's death, to investigate Rachael's true identity and eventually she killed Rachael (which she thought was done by Alex). In Anna's case, on the one hand, she wants to find out the truth about the explosion and the murderer of the explosion, but on the other hand, she rejects the truth and that's why she pushes Matt down the cliff when Matt told her the truth during their date. Judith Herman defines this as the dialectics of trauma, the conflict between the desire to tell and the will to deny: The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectics of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. (Herman, 2001, p.2) Anna maybe unconsciously aware that she is the real murderer of her mother and sister, but she just denies it and tries to find a scapegoat to compensate her own guilt.

The tragic end of the film is also an exhibition of the improper treatment of the trauma victims. The trauma recovery for all the trauma victims can be divided into three stages respectively. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life (Herman, 2001, p.156). After returning home, Anna has no sense of safety and family intimacy and she is largely marginalized. As Anna's father is in love with another woman (in Anna's eyes, the murderer of her mother), what's worse, they shows their intimacy in front of Anna. When watching TV together, Rachel and Steven kisses each other on the sofa while Anna sits beside them, which makes Anna become more enraged because she is already angry about her father's sleeping with Rachel while her

mother is still alive and sick in bed. Filled with anger, unconscious guilt and jealousy, Anna wants to investigate Rachel's true identity with her sister Alex (the Alex she projected in her mind). Unable to find Rachel's identity according to her driver's license, they think Rachel is the Mildred Kemp, a nanny who killed the three children of the family she has been working for in order to marry their father. Anna and Alex think that Rachel will kill them, so they are terrified. For them, there is no safety. Meanwhile there is no communication either, which causes the final tragedy. For the good of Anna, everybody keeps the secret of her mother's death. When Matt tries to tell her the truth of what happened that night in the yard of Anna's house and in the grocery store, he is interrupted by Rachel, which makes Anna believe firmly that Rachel is hiding something. With curiosity and doubt, Anna asks her father for help, but Steven turns a deaf ear to her. He doesn't either listen to Anna or give her a chance to know the truth. At the book launching party, when Anna is terrified by her envision of ghost in the kitchen, her father is angry and just tells Anna "just go to bed" without asking why and what causes Anna's panic. When Anna tells him about her suspicion of Rachel's true identity, he chooses to hold the secret and tells Anna he is going to marry Rachel in their home. Facing Anna's anger and suspicion, he just says to Anna "maybe you should see Dr. Silberling". The failed communication once and again makes Anna have no sense of safety, cannot remember the past and cannot reconnect to the ordinary life.

For Anna, in the end, after killing Rachel, facing her father, she suddenly realizes what she has done and what has happened that night in a way of flashbacks. From the mirror, she saw only herself, not Alex and herself as she envisioned. In this way, she experiences the traumatic events again and thus her true recovery from trauma begins.

In a word, the film's characterization of Anna in *The Uninvited* not only illustrates the psychological trauma suffered by victims of severe trauma and the means of trauma recovery, but also highlights the importance of communication with and listening to trauma victims.

2. NARRATING TRAUMA

Though trauma seems unspeakable and unrepresentable, in literature, however, it has to be represented and spoken, therefore writers (in this film, the director) have to find a way to mirror the mind of the trauma victim, put into words (pictures/films) the trauma experience with literary devices so that the readers or audiences can truly understand trauma and trauma experience. These devices include narrative forms, text structure, and specific techniques such as the imitation of the symptoms of the trauma victims (including flashback, nightmare, multiple personality disorders and belatedness as well as others.)

The form of literature work is crucial to the theme that the work tends to explore and the form constitutes part of the content of a work of art. "It is not only content that is understood (or misunderstood) by the attentive. There is also form, by which term we may denote all those features of a work of art that compose its unity and individuality as an object of sensory experience." (Encyclopedia Britannica Online) It is form that makes a work unique and meaningful. In providing sensory experience, form plays an equal role with content. In literary works, especially in films, in order to let readers interpret the meaning of the text, it is the author's creation to create a suitable writing form and atmosphere to attract the readers' attention through the form.

Due to its unique subject, trauma literature is unique in form. Just like DeMeester argues "the modernist literary works written in the decade after World War I constitute a literature of trauma: their forms often replicate the damaged psyche of a trauma survivor and their contents often portray his characteristic disorientation and despair" (1998, p.649). To let the readers/audiences understand the trauma and the recovery process, the structure of *The Uninvited* exactly replicates the three stages of recovery process of trauma victims. The film starts with trauma, in the way that Anna tells her dream to Dr. Silberling about the explosion that night. It is the account of the trauma and the beginning of trauma victims understanding of trauma itself. In the second part of the film, Anna goes back to her home and begins to cope with her trauma and reconnects to the ordinary life. The film shows readers the symptoms of the trauma victims such as nightmare, flashback, schizophrenia and the behaviors of the victim when Anna tries to understand the trauma and her struggling for recovery. The last part of the film is her recovery, only in a traumatic way. By narrating in three stages and in the order of recovery process, the film replicates trauma victim's recovery process and the structure of the film becomes text. The exposure of the story and Rachel's identity is the exposure of Anna's trauma; only through the exposure can trauma victims really understand the trauma.

Most of the trauma victims probably will develop multiple personality disorder (also called dissociative identity disorder). According to the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), multiple personality disorder is a mental disturbance in which "two or more distinct identities or personality states" alternate in controlling the patient's consciousness and behavior. The victims suffering from multiple personality disorder have split personality, when they encounter the things that can trigger their memory of the past traumatic events, they can switch into an alternate personality. In order to show Anna's multiple personality disorder, the director of *The Uninvited* creates the character Alex to mimic Anna's mind and mislead reader/audience's attention.

After the trauma, Anna develops multiple personality disorder and she feels angry about her mother's death and Rachel's invasion of her former family, and she has split into two personalities as her memory and herself has been fragmented. "Fragmentation of the self into dissociated alters is the central feature of multiple personality disorder. The array of personality fragments usually includes at least one 'hateful' or 'evil' alter, as well as one socially conforming, submissive, or 'good' alter" (Herman, 2001, p.90). The two alters are opposite and often in conflict with each other. Anna's split personality is represented by herself and her sister Alex. Anna projects her desire, fear and helplessness to Alex and assumes that Rachel is Mildred Kemp and thinks herself and Alex is in great danger. Anna in the film stands for the submissive or good alter, she behaves in a submissive way and in a subordinate position in the whole plot, while Alex stands for the hateful or evil alter.

The character of Alex created in the film serves two purposes. First, it can show the multiple personality disorder from which Anna suffers. Second, it deceives the reader/audience to believe Anna's story. The whole movie is told from the perspective of Anna, which makes her narration believable. Here Anna is the narrator, she stands in a prior position and makes reader/audience readily accept her opinion and believe her. What's more, this kind of narration can produce sympathetic identification. Jauss defines "sympathetic identification" as an aesthetic disposition which is capable of breaking down the distance of admiration as well as the self-satisfaction of sentimentality and which can create solidarity leading to action and emulation (Jauss, 1974, p.307). While watching the film, the distance between Anna and the audience has been broken, the audience is inclined to think Rachel's real identity is Mildred Kemp and Anna is in danger. Along with Anna's narration and exploration, the manipulated delay creates the "blank" for the reader to fill in. Just like Hamlet's delay of his killing caused much mystery, delay is made full use of in *The Uninvited*. The writer tries his best to delay the revealing of the mystery. In the film, everybody except Anna knows the cause of the explosion, yet every opportunity for Anna to know the truth is delayed. And the revealing of Rachel's identity is delayed, too. To the reader, in the delay, the reading/watching process becomes difficult yet more interesting, readers are eager to explore with the narrator. The more difficult the process is, the better experience readers will have. In the end, when the truth was revealed, the audience can know how wrong they are and thus the true feeling of MPD sufferers and the thrilling effect of this narrative are presented.

Besides the usage of MPD as a symptom and as a technique, intertextuality is used in the film. Intertextuality means that meaning in a text can only be understood in relation to other texts, no work stands alone but is interlinked with the tradition that came before it and the

context in which it is produced. In *The Uninvited*, there are two texts, one is the text about Anna's own trauma, the other is Mildred Kemp's killing story, and these two texts are interrelated.

When about leaving the institution, Anna was grabbed by a mad woman and she told Anna that "do you really think they will fix you? They couldn't fix me", then the woman said "who will I tell my stories to?" These two questions sound like a prophet and a desperate request for being listened to, and they lead readers' attention to the untold story of the woman. Readers may wonder who this woman is and what her story is. Later, the Kemp's story is unfolded by Anna's investigation of Rachel's identity. From the true story of Wright children murder case, with the identical necklace and the tranquilizer found in Rachel's room as evidence, readers tend to believe that Rachel is the run-away murderer. The intertextuality of these two texts gives readers the impression that Anna is going to repeat the tragic fate of the three children who have been murdered. Readers are deceived here as they will follow the designed pitfall of the film. Until the movie comes to its end, readers haven't realized that they are misguided and the film achieves the effect as a psycho and thriller film. Here intertextuality can be interpreted as the connection between reality and illusion in the film. Anna may learn the name of Mildred Kemp unconsciously in the psychiatric institution. For Anna cannot distinguish between her illusion of the past experience and reality, thus the traumatic events are constantly experienced as if they were happening at present and it makes Anna cannot get back to normal life. The text of Mildred Kemp stands for the common denominator of psychological trauma that is a feeling of "intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation." (Herman, 2011, p.33)

And also, flashbacks and ghost as narrative devices are suitable for trauma narrative. Flashback is an interjected scene that takes the narrative back in time from the current point the story has reached (Pavis, 1998, p.151). Flashback is often used to recount the events which happened before the story. To the trauma victims, the danger of past experience is always present and the terrible memories such as images and thoughts may haunt them. As the writer cannot describe the mind of the trauma victims in the fiction, if he does, readers will not be deceived by him. But in films, the mind of the trauma victim can be vividly presented by flashbacks. In *The Uninvited*, when the traumatic events and image are constantly repeated in the victim's mind in the film. Besides showing the victim's psychological condition, flashback is also used as a way to unveil the mystery. In *The Uninvited*, the mystery and Anna's exploration of the past are revealed in flashbacks, the audiences finally realize Anna is the true murderer; Alex is the imagined character in the film. This is exactly how the trauma victims have to experience for their recovery. Ghost is another common device in literature works or films, readers can encounter ghost

in any kind of literature, even in children literature. As ghost nightmare is another symptom of trauma victims, for literature of trauma, the using of ghost can vividly represent the unrepresentable and the unspeakable. The ghosts are symbolic figures in *The Uninvited*, the ghost of Anne's mother symbolizes Anna's regret and guilt, and the ghost of Matt symbolizes Anna's resistance to accept the reality that she herself killed her mother and sister, and the ghosts of three dead children symbolizes her terror and helplessness. In the film, the ghost of Anna's mother appears several times. In the boathouse, when the ghost of Anna's mother points at Anna and shouts "murderer", Anna is terrified by her mother's accusation so when Matt tells her the truth she pushes Matt down the cliff. Anna's fear and helplessness leads her to believe that she is in danger. As no one is willing to listen to her, she cannot return to the ordinary life, and eventually she takes the knife and kills Rachel. The ghosts speak out Anna's inner psycho and make the reader/audience understand the mind of the trauma victims.

CONCLUSION

As a distinct genre of literature, trauma literature has gone under great changes. It has developed from just describing the trauma symptoms to a comprehensive analysis of the trauma and trauma narrative itself. When discussing James Joyce, Beckett insists "Here form is content, content is form. His writing is not about something; it is that something itself" (1972, p.14). In writing, form and content are equally important. To represent and narrate the seemingly unrepresentable, inexpressible and unassimilable thing in works of trauma, writers have to consider the characters of trauma and try to make readers understand the nature of trauma and the split personality of trauma victims. In *The Uninvited*, the director creatively applies a lot of literary devices and techniques such as internal focalization, intertextuality, flashbacks and ghost to mimic the forms and symptoms of trauma. By these literary techniques, *The Uninvited* portrays a typical trauma victim, it shows the symptoms and recovery processes of the trauma victims, examines the nature of trauma as well as illuminates new method for trauma writing.

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