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The Occurrence and Purpose of Trauma in Selected Works of Gillian Flynn

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Diplomandka bude prezentovat přehled možných interpretací traumatu, včetně rozdělení na kolektivní a individuální trauma, obzvláště poté traumatu z dětství, násilí jak fyzickému tak verbálnímu, či psychickému, traumatu v malých městech a tomu, jaký vliv trauma má na postavy v díle Gillian Flynn a k jakým účelům autorka trauma využívá, to vše zařadí do širšího literárního kontextu.

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ANNOTATION

This paper is focused on the occurrence and purpose of trauma in literature, namely two novels of the genre of psychological thrillers by Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl*. The central theme of the thesis is the way the author incorporates trauma into her work with regards to the contemporary society and the personality and behaviour of the victims, while also focusing on various events which possess the power to shape the identity of the people influenced by traumatic events. The main goal of this thesis is to analyse the signs and symptoms the characters are enduring following their experience of traumatic events, and the ways the author uses to depict the characters as attempting to cope with the situation. Such coping mechanisms include addiction to substances or self-destructive behaviours. The thesis also aims for the clarification of what actually is the purpose of trauma in these two novels.

KEYWORDS

Trauma, abuse, alcoholism, self-harm, society, neglect, USA, fear, anxiety, mind.

ANOTACE

Tato práce je zaměřena na výskyt a účel traumatu v literatuře, obzvláště poté v psychologických thrillerech od Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* a *Gone Girl*. Ústředním tématem této práce je způsob, jakým autorka začleňuje trauma do svého díla s ohledem na současnou společnost a na osobnost a chování obětí, přičemž se dale soustředí na události, které mají moc formovat identitu člověka ovlivněného traumatem. Hlavním cílem této práce je analyzovat znaky a symptomy, kterými postavy trpí po prožití traumatických událostí, a způsoby, které autorka využívá k vyobrazení snahy postav vyrovnat se s danou situací, Tyto způsoby zahrnují závislost na návykových látkách, nebo sebedestruktivní chování. Tato práce se zároveň snaží objasnit, jaký je vlastně účel traumatu v těchto dvou románech.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Trauma, zneužívání, alkoholismus, sebepoškozování, společnost, zanedbávání, USA, strach, úzkost, mysl.

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Introduction

Traumatic experiences are unfortunately of immense influence to daily lives of a great number of people in the contemporary world, affecting many authors' work and often constituting the meaning of various pieces of literature, standing either as central topics of the literary works, or as tools to induce dramatic or terrifying atmosphere¹, or to evoke certain negative emotions or feelings of compassion in readers. Trauma is thus a topic which provides authors of other ways to conduct their writing.

The experience of trauma is an event so devastating and overwhelming that the victim is unable to fully understand the moments or to even make any kind of sense of it², while the experience remains with the mind of the victim, possessing the ability to impact them greatly and follow them into adulthood, causing the person to experience negative emotions while struggling with their daily lives. However, there are also other, seemingly less devastating, though long-term and thus similarly powerful kinds of trauma to be analysed in the two chosen novels, *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, such as for instance childhood trauma and its power to influence the victims' personalities and behaviours.

Additionally, many authors choose to implement trauma in their works due to the contemporary interest in trauma, which is largely connected to the rising popularity of the decrease of stigma surrounding mental health as well as the attempt to provide readers with various ways of identification and acceptance of self, due to the fact that the characters are often struggling with having to endure persisting symptoms rooted in their previous troubling experiences, which further provides authors with the power to foreshadow how past can influence the future.

What is more, when it comes to Gillian Flynn, the purpose of this paper is to analyse to which extent the author manages to link the negative past of their characters to their contemporary selves, their issues and struggles, which they are unable to overcome, plaguing their lives with depression, fear and inability to accept themselves, while also presenting the coping mechanisms as a reaction to past hurtful events, such coping mechanisms, which are often

¹ Amanda Charles, "Sexual Assault and its Impacts in Young Adult Literature" in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* vol. 12, published December 2019, 101.

² Beata Piatek, *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2014), 32.

judged by the public, including alcoholism or self-harming behaviours. It is also the purpose of this thesis to analyse whether the author manages to present these issues without judgement, which could further be hurtful not only to the fictive characters, but also to the readers struggling with similar issues.

Lastly, other kinds of trauma are analysed within this paper, the author implying various sources of trauma when it comes to the characters` personalities, where childhood maltreatment, sexual abuse as well as trauma stemming from residing in small towns are of great impact upon the characters` identity and self-perception, with all these facts being central to the analytical part of this thesis, where possible signs of trauma and the following consequences for the characters are identified, while further constituting the question to which extent the use of trauma is for dramatic purposes and to which extent the topic of trauma stands as way to communicate with the readers, while offering them a way of identification with the characters, or suggesting compassion and understanding.

1. General overview of the term Trauma

To introduce the term trauma, it is interesting to have a look at where the notion of trauma has its roots. According to Schönfelder, the term itself has its origin in ancient Greek and the borrowed word “denotes a violent injury from an external cause that breached the body`s integrity.”³ The original Greek meaning thus already points to the contemporary meaning of trauma from the psychological point of view, also due to the fact that the author further appoints the term with another name, a “wound”.⁴ However, the term wound, as one might already know, does not only refer to a physical injury, but also one of mental state. Caruth, author dedicating plenty of her work to the notion of trauma, affirms that even though the Greek semantics of the word mostly “referred to an injury inflicted on a body,”⁵ the term subsequently came into use “as a wound inflicted not upon the body, but upon the mind,”⁶ suggesting that hurting one`s mind is capable of doing damage as well as physical injury.

³ Christa Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction* (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2013), 14.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 3.

⁶ Ibid.

Another author, Frankel, quotes the medical officer, Ferenczi, who spent his time focusing on soldiers believed to be suffering from “shell-shock”, managed to reach a conclusion that the trauma itself stems from the psychically uncontrollable instance affecting the victim, which is also suggested by Eyerman, who mostly stresses the unthinkability of the experience as being potentially traumatizing⁷. However, Frankel further claims that such definition does not truly work with the notion of “perceptual experience” and that the “definition of trauma has changed.”⁸ Frankel thus foreshadows that trauma is more about the way an individual perceives and experiences the instance of trauma, than about the instance itself. To further elaborate on this topic, Frankel insists that Ferenczi himself later on concluded that the meaning to the victim was of greater importance than “the vicissitudes of mental energy.”⁹

As Feantsa mentions, trauma is not a typical experience as it rather than that generally “refers to experiences or events that by definition are out of the ordinary in terms of their overwhelming nature,”¹⁰ continuing by explaining that trauma experiences are often much more than just full of stress to the survivor, but that “they are also shocking, terrifying and devastating to the trauma survivor and often result in feelings of terror, fear, shame, helplessness and powerlessness.”¹¹ Another author, Piatek, insists that traumatic event is “an event so extreme that it cannot be properly registered by consciousness, therefore it remains unassimilated and does not submit to the normal processes of memory storage or recall, nor can it be forgotten.”¹² The victim is thus immensely confused and hurt by the experience, however, there is not possibility of unravelling the experience. To continue, Piatek states that since the victims are unable to come to a solution or assimilation of the experience, they tend to “return in the form of unbidden memories: flashbacks, hallucinations and nightmares.”¹³ As a result, the memories might come back at any time without any logical connections, which can be greatly perplexing as well as distressing for the victims. It therefore comes in no surprise that victims of trauma often feel irreversible loss of control, need for control or guilt and that they can suffer from various coping mechanisms, such as for instance self-harm or substance abuse.

⁷Ron Eyerman, “Social Theory and Trauma” in *Acta Sociologica* 56, no. 1 (2013), 42. Accessed May 26, 2023. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23525660>

⁸ Jay B. Frankel, *Ferenczi's Trauma Theory* (New York: New York University Postdoctoral Program, 1998), 1.

⁹ Frankel, *Ferenczi's Trauma Theory*, 2.

¹⁰ FEANTSA, *Recognising the Link Between Trauma and Homelessness*, 3. Published January 27, 2017.

https://www.feantsa.org/download/feantsa_traumaandhomelessness03073471219052946810738.pdf

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Beata Piatek, *History, Memory, Trauma in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2014), 32.

¹³ Ibid.

In addition, the Jed Foundation agrees that trauma as a term is frequently utilised in the context of immensely influential event, such as for instance “sexual assault or a devastating natural disaster.”¹⁴ However, the foundation stresses the importance of distinguishing between events that might be stressful or anxiety provoking and between “traumatic events that are incomprehensible to us and can have a substantial, long-term impact on our quality of life and well-being.”¹⁵ It is thus vital to understand that there is a profound incomprehensibility connected to the trauma experience, where the victim continues to suffer often due to the fact that they are unable to make sense of the event. What is more, Caruth even quotes Freud, indicating that “the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.”¹⁶ Additionally, Caruth repeats the issue of the occurrence of the event as “shocking and unexpected,”¹⁷ which is, according to the author, the gist of the incapability to grasp the meaning of the event for the victim and their subsequent confusion and misunderstanding. All of these facts trouble the trauma victims deeply and stand as a foundation of the following symptoms, such as the terrible memories returning in dreams as well as the above-mentioned repetition, and many more signs, which are discussed later on in this thesis.

To carry on, the FEANTSA organization continue with their article by stating that there are two types of traumata varying based on their time length. Firstly, initial type is described as a trauma occurrence at a particular time and space, which is “short-lived, such as serious accident, sudden loss of parent or a single sexual assault.”¹⁸ The event thus happens in a single or several short moments, however, the experience is so strong and negative that it overwhelms the victim and shapes their identity for a long time afterwards.

The second type is described as a long-term experience, where the victim is exposed to the traumatic experience repeatedly and for a long span of time. The organisation mentions that

¹⁴ The Jed Foundation. “What Is Emotional Trauma | JED,” n.d.
<https://jedfoundation.org/resource/understanding-emotional-trauma/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, 3-4.

¹⁷ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, 6.

¹⁸ FEANTSA, *Recognising the Link Between Trauma and Homelessness*, 3.

these experiences frequently “begin in early childhood and occur within family or social environment.”¹⁹ The victim is thus harmed in an environment which should typically provide them with safety, however, in this scenario it is not the case. The experiences, as FEANTSA further writes, “are usually repetitive and prolonged, involve direct or indirect harm or neglect by caregivers or other entrusted adults in an environment where escape is impossible.”²⁰ One could therefore claim that not only the victims are not feeling safe within the context of their family, but they are also provided with no way out of the traumatic events. Additionally, Patock-Peckham also mentions childhood “maltreatment” as one of the leading causes of not only the inability to form and sustain healthy and lasting relationships, but also of “eating disorders, risky sex, sleep difficulties, re-victimization, homelessness, mood disorders, PTSD, suicide attempts and substance abuse.”²¹ The author thus intends to point out how fundamental the time period of childhood actually is and how poor treatment of the child may have long-lasting, negative effects on the trauma victim, shaping their unhealthy behaviours even in adulthood.

Similar differentiation is also presented by the JED Foundation, where the authors follow equivalent belief that “traumatic experiences and events may happen in a flash and be unexpected and shocking, or may evolve more slowly overtime,” where for the second case, the foundation mentions for instance abuse, which has been undergone by the victim for a long period of time, or for instance neglect.²² The second scenario is often experienced within the victim`s family or social group.

However, as the JED Foundation claims, be it one case or another, the consequences are often similar and immensely negative in the way they influence one`s ability to carry on and enjoy their time on daily basis, while it also has a negative effect on one`s functioning during the day.²³ What is more, according to the JED Foundation, traumatic experience frequently happens to “shake foundational beliefs and shape our sense of safety in the world around us”²⁴ as the traumatic experience has the power to make one`s “life feel overwhelming and

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Julie Patock-Peckham et al., “Dimensions of childhood trauma and their direct and indirect links to PTSD, impaired control over drinking, and alcohol related problems” in *Addictive Behaviours Reports*, published 2020. 2.

²² The Jed Foundation. “What Is Emotional Trauma | JED,” n.d. <https://jedfoundation.org/resource/understanding-emotional-trauma/>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

unmanageable.”²⁵ The victims of traumatic events might thus again feel as if their lives are out of their control and it again leads them to various coping mechanisms which provide an illusion of safety or being in charge of their lives.

To continue, the JED Foundation also summarizes the meaning of emotional trauma, where the authors mostly focus on the causes and following consequences of traumatic experiences concerning the mental sphere of one`s health. As leading causes of emotional trauma the authors mention for instance long-term “abuse, bullying, discrimination or humiliation,” and stress the fact that one does not need to be hurt in any physical way for emotional trauma to occur and claim that the recovery is often much more difficult in emotional trauma withstanders than among those who have suffered some kind of physical harm.²⁶ The reason used to argue is that, as written in the article, “trauma can actually alter the way our brains function, especially when that trauma is chronic.”²⁷

In addition, Patock-Peckham also investigates the issue of trauma within the context of childhood experience, where the author claims that among the maltreatment of children, one would not only include physical abuse, but also “physical neglect (i.e. not being provided proper shelter, food, or medical care,”²⁸ such issue is visible in for instance the novel *Sharp Objects*, where the children are intentionally made sick for their mother`s selfish purposes.²⁹ To continue, the author further classifies the instances of physical or emotional abuse as well as “lack of support” as cases of childhood maltreatment, writing that when it comes to not supporting one`s child, it is appropriate to include the parents or family not being helpful or caring enough,³⁰ which can result in “lowered intellect” as well as lower ability to attach oneself to other people, or to be mature emotionally.³¹ Such individuals might therefore feel unworthy of other`s love or attention, since they have not experienced it enough since childhood, which possesses the ability to negatively impact their self-confidence as well as overall quality of life.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Patock-Peckham et al., “Dimensions of childhood trauma and their direct and indirect links to PTSD, impaired control over drinking, and alcohol related problems”, 2.

²⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Shaye Areheart Books, 2016), 438.

³⁰ Patock-Peckham et al., “Dimensions of childhood trauma and their direct and indirect links to PTSD, impaired control over drinking, and alcohol related problems”, 2.

³¹ Ibid.

Additionally, as far as individual trauma is concerned, according to Andermahr, there is an extensive focus in literature, specifically in fairy tales, on the orphan that stays after the mother`s death. Focusing on the binary, the bad stepmother, that substitutes the mother and makes the orphan suffer. However, there is hardly any focus on the event of childbirth, which can be a traumatic event as well.³² Meaning for the most part that the childbirth can result in death, which is often expressed from the point of view of the orphan or the father, or that it is a lifechanging event, as Andermahr claims.³³ Focus is shifted to for instance the Little Red Riding Hood, where Andermahr quotes Figes, who mentions the possibilities as to why the little girl was sent through the forest alone, mentioning difficult childbirth as one of the possibilities, where the mother had to recover first, or the necessity to care for her new infant.³⁴

To continue, it is possible to say that the necessity to sacrifice one`s own life in order to properly care for somebody else can be a traumatizing event on itself, as the individual might feel trapped, responsible, or unable to help. Such reality is true not only for women who just gave birth and need to care for their new-born babies, but also for family members, again women most of the time, who need to look after ill family members or loved ones. Sharma focuses on such issue and mentions that “the amount of assistance provided by the family-caregiver usually exceeds the amount of help provided under ordinary circumstances,” while also stating that most of the work is again done by women³⁵. Such experience might not only be traumatizing due to the closeness to an ill person who is not getting better, but also due to the feeling of missing out, which is rather draining and might negatively influence one`s mental health and their perception of their own life. Such phenomenon takes place in both the novels analysed in this thesis, where the main characters have experience with a dying family member as well as with the idea of an orphan in the novel *Sharp Objects*.

However, the necessity to look after somebody else is not the sole problem in the contemporary society. It is important to take a closer look at who is the caregiver most of the time. As was

³²Sonya Andermahr, and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, eds. *Trauma Narratives and Herstory*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 75-76.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Nidhi Sharma, Subho Chakrabarti, and Sandeep Grover. “Gender Differences in Caregiving among Family - Caregivers of People with Mental Illnesses” in *World Journal of Psychiatry* 6, no. 1. Published March 22, 2016. 7-17. <https://doi.org/10.5498/wjp.v6.i1.7>.

previously mentioned, those, who usually provide help and care for members of the family in need, are usually women. Such statement points out to the fact that contemporary society is still to be considered a patriarchal society and thus the pressure inflicted upon female members of the society is not negligible. According to Sharma, studies have been conducted to prove that the fact that women are expected to be responsible for such tasks is negatively impacting female mental health. As Sharma specifically states, “women experience greater mental and physical strain, greater caregiver-burden, and higher levels of psychological distress while providing care.”³⁶

However, Sharma furthermore points to the problematics of role strains, where a person, male or female, is unable to meet the expectations imposed on them and it thus leads to feelings of captivity, being overwhelmed or depressed³⁷ and in reality, being perceived as a caregiver by nature, even though one does not share this feeling, might come off as damaging to the person providing care simply because for their gender that is the socially acceptable role.

What is more, it is important to focus on the roles appointed to males as well as women are not the only ones restricted by their socially appointed roles. Men are believed to be the breadwinners, those who can take care of their wives and children materially and financially. Such stereotype can be profoundly hurtful to those who are unable to find a stable job or are not providing for the family financially in any other sense, as unemployment, as will be further on mentioned, can be traumatizing by itself, because as written by Heinzen, sometimes the roles anticipated from a person might be conflicted, while there is also a “dark side of social influence.”³⁸

What is more, for the purpose of this paper, it is also important to explain the term collective trauma. There are various definitions of what collective trauma stands for, As Hirschberger writes, “the term collective trauma refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society.”³⁹ Other authors, Onega and her colleague, Ganteau, claim that

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Thoman Heinzen and Wind Goodfriend, “Social Influence: Conformity, Social Roles, and Obedience” in *Social Psychology* (Sage Publications, 2017), 3.

³⁹ Gilad Hirschberger, “Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning” in *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (August 10, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441>.

collective traumas often stem from “moments of historical crisis” such as the world wars, colonialism or for instance the terrorist attacks.⁴⁰ However, the instances that cause the population to be traumatized might be less visible ones, which can correspond with the fact that other aspects of society might negatively influence the citizens just as much, these might include “patriarchal ideology, unmitigated capitalism or globalisation.”⁴¹ All in all, Eyerman states that a situation may be perceived as traumatizing to the group mostly when the participants are having difficulties to grasp what is happening around them, while being unable to understand the situation as well as navigate themselves through the events.⁴²

To continue, another issue correlating with the idea of collective trauma is the time that can pass until the society or members of a particular group break free from the memories of a traumatizing event. According to Hirschberger, the problem with collective trauma is that it does not last only for the time the survivors are alive but prevails long after their death in a sort of `collective memory`.⁴³ Therefore, even though there might not be any direct witnesses of a traumatic event, the collective feelings of dread, guilt or unease still persist within the family, citizens or society.

However, as Alexander and his colleagues claim, the sole event, horrible as it might be, is not enough to inflict a trauma so deep that it persists even after the witnesses are gone. As the authors explain, it is largely about the representation of the event and states that “events are one thing, representations of these events quite another. Trauma is not the result of group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity.”⁴⁴ The authors further mention that the trauma is a decision made by members of the group to “represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Jean-Michel Ganteau, and Susana Onega, eds. *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Eyerman, “Social Theory and Trauma”, 43.

⁴³ Hirschberger, “Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning”.

⁴⁴ Alexander, Jeffrey C., Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (California: University of California Press, 2004), 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Another concept related to collective trauma is cultural trauma. Such concept refers again to a traumatic event, which however shapes collective identity of larger groups of people. As Alexander and his colleagues write, “cultural trauma occurs when members of a group feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.”⁴⁶ Such shaping of collective memory is similar for both collective and cultural trauma, however, cultural trauma bears the power to affect “social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations.”⁴⁷ Cultural trauma can thus be considered a concept influence of which can be more widespread, one could in this sense present for instance Holocaust or slavery as a source of cultural trauma.

Connected to all those troubling experiences, there are symptoms and signs to be noticed in the victims of traumatizing events. There are many signs of trauma in which an experience from a terrible event might manifest itself. The victims often experience flashbacks, memory loss and silence. As Herman writes about, not solely, sexual assault victims, “women were silenced by fear and shame” which gave further permission to the aggressors to continue with their violence.⁴⁸ Such inability to express the wrongdoings executed upon them not only withdraws the victim’s ability to heal from the trauma, but to also bring such violence to the public eye and get justice.

Mambrol, on the other hand, states that according to the model of trauma based on the theory of Sigmund Freud, the traumatic experience is intense to such extent, that the limits of language are profoundly challenged and the meaning can become fractioned causing the event and the following suffering of the victim to be perceived as “unrepresentable.”⁴⁹ The silence is therefore not only the response to the surrounding stigma, but the author suggests that the inability to process the experience itself is the cause. Mambrol further mentions the pluralistic approach to modelling trauma, insisting that “the assumed unspeakability of trauma is one among many responses to an extreme event rather than its defining feature.” One could therefore assume that the victim’s inability to make sense of the event as well as their incapability to put the

⁴⁶ Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective identity*, 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery – The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 20.

⁴⁹ Nasrullah Mambrol, *Trauma Studies*, published on December 19, 2018.
<https://literariness.org/2018/12/19/trauma-studies/>

experience into words are those kinds of issues causing the victim not to speak up, together with their feelings of shame and fear.

Furthermore, the person`s inability to make sense of a traumatic events and thus the impossibility of letting go may lead to the victim or witness starting to experience flashbacks of the event which have so far been buried deep inside their minds. As explained on the Merriam-Webster website, a flashback refers to a “past incident recurring vividly in the mind.”⁵⁰ Andermahr further supports this claim by quoting Henke and writing that the survivors of trauma might experience “numbing, dysphoria and uncontrollable flashbacks.”⁵¹ To this claim one could add an explanation that even though a person who lived through a very disrupting even wishes to let go, the memory of it still dwells deep inside their minds and individual images pop up without the victim`s wish.

To carry on, numbing was also previously mentioned as one of the symptoms following a traumatic experience. As Andermahr mentions, the term numbing stands for a state of mind where the person under the influence of trauma feels detached from the events and might not feel rage or fear, as these emotions dissolve and leave a calm state of mind. Andermahr furthermore cites Herman, stating that “the person may feel as though the event is not happening to her, [...] as though the whole experience is a bad dream from which she will shortly awaken.”⁵² Such feelings of numbness might pose even more danger for the victim, however, it might be perceived as a coping mechanism with the traumatic experience, where the victim detaches from their body and refuses to admit that what is happening is real.

What is more, it is possible to state that traumatic experience might lead to the disintegration of the victim`s personality. Andermahr cites King to present the “psychological disintegration of the victim”⁵³ with the statement that “the human subject whose identity and sense of life-continuity have been profoundly disrupted by trauma might be in need of the restoration of the kind of wholeness.”⁵⁴ One could say that the victims might feel that their identity is shattered and might indulge in various dangerous coping mechanisms to create an illusion of control. Herman for instance mentions alcoholism, drug addiction, self-mutilation or suicidality as an

⁵⁰ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/flashback>

⁵¹ Andermahr, *Trauma narratives and herstory*, 86.

⁵² Andermahr, *Trauma narratives and herstory*, 39.

⁵³ Andermahr, *Trauma narratives and herstory*, 86.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

outcome of child abuse trauma.⁵⁵ In the *Gone Girl*, one of these coping mechanisms mentioned is for instance alcoholism or self-harm.

Concerning self-harm, the author Noll and her colleagues extensively investigated the link between self-harming behaviours and former trauma of sexual abuse and conclude that the “direct re-enactment inflicted by the survivor herself represents a certain internalization of the trauma,”⁵⁶ meaning that the trauma has become a part of the victim, shaping their responses and overall behaviour, including unhealthy behaviours such as for instance self-harm. The author further mentions that when it comes to sexual abuse, the experience is capable of shaping the victims attitude towards sexual activity, while the PTSD symptoms as experienced by the victim, together with the above mentioned “sexualized attitudes would be predictive of revictimization and self-harm,”⁵⁷ expressing the connection of the negative experience of sexual abuse and the trauma resurfacing years after, while the victim attempts to ease the pain by mutilating themselves.

In addition, Mambrol also believes in the trauma’s ability to “fragment the psyche” and additionally adds the idea of memory and past into the topic of trauma. The author writes that “the original event continues to inflict harm” through the ongoing memories of the experience, which inflict even more suffering to the victims, and are described as “pathological.”⁵⁸ In other words, the flashbacks the survivors experience are bringing more pain to the person, instead of letting them free from the negative experience. The author further mentions the reaction which might follow after the event, which is called “repression”. Due to such coping mechanism, the victims can suffer additional psychological harm, such as dissociation.⁵⁹

However, there are more coping mechanisms following to the experience of trauma, which the victims might decide to turn to. According to Patock-Peckham and her colleagues, there is a possibility of a scenario where trauma survivors “turn to excessive alcohol use to dampen the

⁵⁵ Herman, *Trauma and recovery*, 88.

⁵⁶ Noll, Jennie G., Lisa A. Horowitz, George A. Bonanno, Penelope K. Trickett, and Frank W. Putnam. “Revictimization and Self-Harm in Females Who Experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse” in *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 18, no. 12 published December 2003. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260503258035>.

⁵⁷ Noll, “Revictimization and Self-Harm in Females Who Experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse,” 1456.

⁵⁸ Mambrol, *Trauma Studies*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

arousal reactivity.”⁶⁰ Individual victims thus may feel relief after consuming alcohol, however, such behaviour itself can turn dangerous as it may lead to addiction due to its effects being only temporary. Similarly to alcohol abuse, traumatic experiences might lead the trauma victims to other substance abuse, such as drugs, or to self-harming behaviour.

2. Trauma in the US society

Trauma is a widely discussed topic nowadays and there are reasons why it is so. As Goodman states in his work, “national data of children’s exposure to traumatic experiences are alarming”,⁶¹ further mentioning the frequency of very young children experiencing their first traumatic event already at the age of four.⁶² To continue, the author provides data showing that when a person reaches seventeen years of age in the United States of America, they are very likely to have been witnesses or victims of “crime, violence, and abuse either directly or indirectly,”⁶³ while further mentioning the substance use problem that is at the same time a growing rapidly in the US.⁶⁴ The rising interest in trauma and its consequences is therefore very well-founded when it comes the US society, as it is highly probable that the citizens have encountered a traumatizing event already.

To carry on, the individual experiences people have endured are not all that awakens the interest in trauma. As was already mentioned, collective trauma is of great influence to the society as well. Edkins for instance takes into considerations the wars where thousands of citizens were sent to death by the government,⁶⁵ however, the author states that “by the second world war, it was no longer only service personnel who were intimately affected by state-organised violence”⁶⁶ and mentions the horrific events of bombings in Japan or the atrocities of the Nazi regime, which “led to the deaths of millions concentration camps, open-air shootings and ghettos.”⁶⁷ The people, patriots or not, either felt in a way responsible or simply horrified by

⁶⁰ Patock-Peckham et al., “Dimensions of childhood trauma and their direct and indirect links to PTSD, impaired control over drinking, and alcohol related problems,” 1.

⁶¹ Revital Goodman, *Contemporary Trauma Theory and Trauma-Informed Care in Substance Use Disorders: A Conceptual Model for Integrating Coping and Resilience* (Miami Shores: Barry University School of Social Work, 2017), 186.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

the violence that took place and the society would not be able to forget and let go of fear or guilt.

As Watson and her colleagues claim, “lack of access to and the quality of healthcare, affordable housing, and lack of financial resources also continue to have a more significant impact on documented and undocumented immigrants.”⁶⁸ However, immigrants are not the sole affected group, all of these account for regular citizens as well. The authors further mention the necessity to take a closer look at the “complex interwoven threats of health inequity, economic insecurity, environmental injustice and collective trauma.”⁶⁹ All of these problems thus go hand in hand and economic problems of certain groups might negatively contribute to the group’s mental state.

To continue, Rice and his colleagues also mention homelessness as one of the leading issues influencing the mental health of a society. Rice for instance writes that the number of young people in need of housing is greatly larger than the number of available housings, contributing to rising homelessness.⁷⁰ Based on the charts included, it is possible to see that many of these people living outside their homes are often seventeen years or younger⁷¹, therefore they are only kids, without many chances at stable incomes. Such reality gives rise to violent acts or prostitution for the individuals to be able to provide for themselves.

Furthermore, it is vital to note that the interconnection of trauma and homelessness is not to be overlooked and goes both ways. People can end up on the street due to the trauma they experienced, but the homeless life can be traumatizing itself. Again, the FEANTSA writes that people “who are long-term (or chronic) homeless and cycle between street, psychiatry, criminal justice services and temporary accommodation [...] are the most likely to have been exposed

⁶⁸ Watson, Marlene F., Gonzalo Bacigalupe, Manijeh Daneshpour, Wen-Jui Han, and Rubén Parra-Cardona. “COVID-19 Interconnectedness: Health Inequity, the Climate Crisis, and Collective Trauma” in *Family Process* 59, no. 3 (August 3, 2020): 832–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12572>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Eric Rice, Monique Holguin, Hsun-Ta Hsu, Matthew Morton, Phebe Vayanos, Milind Tambe, and Hau Chan. “Linking Homelessness Vulnerability Assessments to Housing Placements and Outcomes for Youth” in *Cityscape* 20, no. 3, published 2018, 71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26524872>.

⁷¹ Rice et al. “Linking Homelessness Vulnerability Assessments to Housing Placements and Outcomes for Youth”, 75.

to trauma.⁷² The organisation further also mentions the lack of affordable housing and long term unemployment or for instance debt or family breakdown as leading causes for homelessness,⁷³ all of which can be considered to be traumatizing.

To carry on, the organization also mentions three ways in which homelessness and trauma is to be interlinked. First of all, it is written that the people experiencing homelessness often experiences some sort of trauma before, most often in childhood.⁷⁴ Secondly, trauma is experienced when people are homeless very often. The group mentions for instance “being a victim or witness of an attack, sexual assault or any violent event. People can also be re-traumatized by services that leave them feeling powerless and controlled.”⁷⁵ Such fact might lead to the need for control or at least the illusion of control stemming from such experience.

However, inhabitants enduring homelessness are not the only ones when it comes to the risk groups where experiencing trauma happens on regular basis. Hackman argues that students living on college campuses in the United States often encounter sexual violence, either as victims, or as witnesses.⁷⁶ Such experience proves as largely damaging to the students` identity and overall mental health as Hackman states that “sexual behaviour is simultaneously a topic of confusion and importance to college students.”⁷⁷ That is to say, experiencing sexual violence at this age not only alters one`s identity and modifies the manner in which one perceives moments of intimacy, it also changes the way one forms relationships in the future and the event can even force the victims to isolate themselves from others, leaving them alone with their negative experience. Such reality is largely founded in the stigma surrounding sexual violence, which, even though diminished now, still exists nowadays. Victims frequently find themselves in the loop of being victim-blamed, condemned for behaving inappropriately including in a sexual way or called out for exaggerating. When it comes to defining what victim-blaming

⁷² FEANTSA, *Recognising the Link Between Trauma and Homelessness*, 1.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 2.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Christine L. Hackman, Sarah E. Pember, Amanda H. Wilkerson, Wanda Burton, and Stuart L. Usdan. “Slut-Shaming and Victim-Blaming: A Qualitative Investigation of Undergraduate Students’ Perceptions of Sexual Violence” in *Sex Education* 17, no. 6, published August 11, 2017, 697–711. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1362332>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

means, it is expressed by Gravelin as a “secondary trauma associated with the negative reactions of others.”⁷⁸ Such behaviour received from others further deepens the victim’s inability to make sense of the experience, leaving them with a feeling that they are at fault without providing any source of justice.

To continue, maltreatment as well as oppression of women is still a common issue nowadays, an issue that a surprisingly large percentage of women must endure on daily basis in the United States. As Moe argues, “woman battering is one of the most pervasive social problems today. It occurs within a central institution in our society, the family or intimate dyad,”⁷⁹ both of which should provide a safe environment to the member and thus when violated, creating a sense of danger, injustice as well as hopelessness. In addition, Moe insists that such situation unfortunately occurs rather frequently in the United States, claiming that such pathological relationships “involve the patterned manipulation, degradation, and abuse of a woman by an intimate partner (most commonly a man) for the purposes of establishing power and control.”⁸⁰ The author thus wishes to express how women must withstand traumatizing situations within the context of a family. It is possible to furthermore claim that such issue is explored by Flynn in both her novels, *Sharp Objects* as well as *Gone Girl*, however, the author also investigates how the roles can be switched or the ways in which they can occur in a parent-child relationships. These instances are analysed in this paper in the context of a damaged marriage as well as the pathological relationships between children and parents where parents harm the child, directly or indirectly, negatively influencing the individuals and causing a lifelong trauma for their offsprings. What is more, Flynn also investigates how the frequency of abuse towards women, which according to Moe, who focused on physical harm, reaches up to “1.5 million of women each year in the United States”⁸¹, can be abused by a woman to create dirty pictures of their husbands and to establish prejudicial attitudes within a community.

⁷⁸ Claire R., Gravelin, Biernat, M., & Baldwin, M.. The impact of power and powerlessness on blaming the victim of sexual assault, *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 22(1), published June 9, 2017, 98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430217706741>

⁷⁹ Angela M. Moe, “Blurring the Boundaries: Women’s Criminality in the Context of Abuse” in *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 32, no. ¾, published 2004, 116. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004583>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Additionally, when it comes to shaming women and their sexuality, such treatment also hides a behaviour which hurts the victim deeply, as it can also prove as traumatizing, discouraging them from sexual exploration. To “slut-shame” stands for being judgemental towards women based on their “actual or perceived sexual behaviour.”⁸² The victim`s sexual behaviour is thus taken an as example of her flawed personality, making the woman feel ashamed. However, such prejudicial behaviour takes place also when it comes to sexual violence, often both shaming and victim-blaming the victim at the same time, which is extremely hurtful to the trauma survivor. Therefore, Pina and her colleagues decided to carry out a research concerning online sexual abuse, during which the authors confirmed that women were more likely to suffer negatively influential consequences such as for instance poor mental health, “social and financial consequences, such as damage to their reputation, breakdown of relationships or loss of employment,”⁸³ all of which are still contemporary “due to the pervasive sexual double standards in society.”⁸⁴ Such behaviour aimed against victims further shows the prevailing differences not solely in the US when it comes to the perception of female and male behaviour, showing that the inequality of men and women is deeply rooted in the society.

3. Trauma in Small Towns

To begin with, it is certainly possible to claim that there are differences between inhabitants of large cities or small towns or rural areas which inevitably affects the overall environment and atmosphere in which the people live. However, it is important to acknowledge the fact that this very difference might also influence how prone to trauma the society is.

⁸² Margot Goblet & Glowacz, F., “Slut Shaming in Adolescence: A Violence against Girls and Its Impact on Their Health” in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(12), published June 21, 2021, 6657. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18126657>

⁸³ Afroditi Pina, Alisha Bell, Kimberley Griffin, and Eduardo Vasquez. “Image Based Sexual Abuse Proclivity and Victim Blaming: The Role of Dark Personality Traits and Moral Disengagement” in *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 11 (5), published October 1, 2021, 1182. <https://opo.iisj.net/index.php/osls/article/view/1183>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

The StrengthenNC team for instance claims that there are experiences which one can call “Adverse Childhood Experiences”⁸⁵ which are allegedly more common in rural areas and communities with lower incomes in general.⁸⁶ All of these experiences have an immense effect on the person’s brain development, where they can pose a risk when it comes to stress handling.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the development of one’s brain and inability to respond to stress well can cause the person to develop various “chronic health problems, mental illnesses and substance use disorders in adulthood.”⁸⁸ One might therefore believe that within the community of a small town or rural areas, trauma survivors have lesser opportunity to find a healthy way to cope with their consequent issues and thus happen to be at higher risk of addiction.

In addition, when it comes to the traumatic events and experiences which citizens of rural areas might be frequently exposed to, there are more and less common ones. However, the mostly experienced ones are “substance abuse, neglect, racism and constant unemployment.”⁸⁹ All of such experiences negatively influence one’s self-image as well as well-being, which further poses a risk to the quality of life. As was mentioned, unemployment can be mentioned in the context of rural life and one can claim with certainty that financial issues can overwhelm the person with uncertainty, anxiety as well as overall stress, all of which can also be claimed to be signs of exposure to trauma.

Furthermore, Velasquez and Juarez, who conducted a research on the topic of traumas typical for rural areas insist that children living in rural areas, namely Latino children in this case, are at greater risk at experiencing a trauma specific for rural regions compared to those living in the cities.⁹⁰ The authors bring into question the higher possibility of being witnesses of various

⁸⁵ StrengthenNC Team, “Rural Communities Face Higher Rates of Childhood Trauma. One Woman Is Using Stanford Methodology to Help Them Heal. | Point of Blue” in Point of Blue, published September 19, 2022. <https://blog.bcbsnc.com/2022/09/rural-communities-face-higher-rates-of-childhood-trauma-one-woman-is-using-stanford-methodology-to-help-them-heal/>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Roberto Jose Velasquez, and Yadira Juarez. “‘Rural-Specific’ Types of Childhood Trauma in Rural Communities” in *Gaming and Technology Addiction*, published 2017, 140 <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-0778-9.ch008>.

accidents taking place on farms, having to frequently migrate with their parents or “relocate from the city to the country,” the children might also feel alone due to being isolated from their relatives and there is also the issue of meagre housing non-suitable for children.⁹¹ What is more, the authors continue by mentioning the unsuitable conditions which are rooted in inappropriate “social, economical and political circumstances.”⁹² Even though the authors focused mostly at Latino families, it is not incorrect to claim that for instance social and economical conditions are an issue in rural areas no matter the ethnicity or race as financial and social problems can be encountered by almost anyone.

To differentiate more between the victims of traumatic events in small towns or rural areas, there is another author who dedicated their research to the notion of rural area traumas while also focusing on gender. Winstanley believes that “rural women with substance disorders may have experienced significantly more childhood trauma than their male counterparts” including sexual assault.⁹³ However, when gender is not taken into account, the author still insists that the traumas such as for instance sexual assaults and physical abuse are significantly frequent for both sexes and when experiences in childhood, there is a high possibility of the events recurring in adulthood as well.⁹⁴ The author further writes about how influencing such experiences and how it shapes the individual, leaving them with various negative feelings such as “sadness, anxiety and anger”, which might give way to drugs and alcohol to the victims life.⁹⁵

What is more, the StrengthenNC team also mentions that people suffering from some kind of trauma are also met with unexpectedly negative responses, where the person “would almost always be met with isolation or punishment.”⁹⁶ As the authors consider the effects such reaction could have on the victim, they claim that the victim’s response would often be “disconnecting from their school and work”⁹⁷, or they might slip down to behaviour that could be considered

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Velasquez, “‘Rural-Specific’ Types of Childhood Trauma in Rural Communities,” 141.

⁹³ West Virginia University, “WVU Today | Childhood Trauma Especially Common among Rural Women with Substance Use Disorders,” published October 28, 2020.
<https://wvutoday.wvu.edu/stories/2020/10/28/childhood-trauma-especially-common-among-rural-women-with-substance-use-disorders>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ StrengthenNC Team, “Rural Communities Face Higher Rates of Childhood Trauma. One Woman Is Using Stanford Methodology to Help Them Heal. | Point of Blue.”

⁹⁷ Ibid.

straightforward destructive or even criminal in certain scenarios, all due to the fact that the victim might “feel as if there is no support or hope for them.”⁹⁸

4. The Contemporary Interest in Trauma

As was previously mentioned, trauma is an interesting topic to explore not only for many scientists or academics nowadays, but for the general public as well. As written by Radstone, door has been opened for Humanities to explore trauma and claims that “the category of trauma theory is now referred to frequently in writings in the Humanities.”⁹⁹ Many psychologists helped to explain the terms trauma and trauma theory, focusing on the interconnection of “actuality and representation” where, as Radstone cites Van der Kolk, “the traumatic event is encoded in the brain in a different way from ordinary memory.”¹⁰⁰

What is more, Balaev for instance claims that “since traumatic experience is intergenerationally transmitted based on shared social characteristics, then everyone can experience trauma based on one’s ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, or economic background, thereby producing a post-traumatic culture.”¹⁰¹ It can thus be said that trauma touches upon everyone and is thus ordinary, which might lead to the need to grasp its meaning, to understand what is going on in one’s mind and therefore it is only natural for people to be interested in the topic.

Additionally, it is also possible to claim that the rise of interest is also indivisibly linked to the open access to information for contemporary general public. Schönfelder for instance writes that trauma came into awareness through the widespread occurrence and use of mass media, allowing thus the general public to be acquainted with and gain general understanding of the topic.¹⁰² It is thus understandable that it was primarily the twentieth century and on when the public became more attentive to the notions of trauma and its consequences, as they happened to be more exposed to informative sources, and what is more, the opportunity of identification

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹Susannah Radstone, “Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics” in *Paragraph* 30, published March 2007, 10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43152697>.

¹⁰⁰ Radstone, *Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics*, 13.

¹⁰¹Michelle Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory” in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 41, no. 2, published June 2008, 152. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029500>.

¹⁰² Schönfelder, *Words and Wounds*, 13.

also plays a crucial role in the rising interest, as a great percentage of people went through traumatic events themselves.

However, these are not the sole reasons for which trauma gained increased awareness. Schönfelder continues by claiming that the what also brought trauma and its outcomes to the public eye was the fact that during the twentieth century, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, otherwise known as the shortened PTSD, was formulated within the branch of psychiatry and more attention started to be dedicated to the “sexual and domestic traumas.”¹⁰³ What is more, the twentieth century was plentiful of women emancipation movements, thanks to which the real consequences and horrors the victims of “violence against children and women” had to endure.¹⁰⁴ Domestic violence victims thus eventually have the chance to speak up thanks to the reduced, though not completely erased, stigma.

However, even today, there are still many issues surrounding the feeling of safety which might hold back the victims from sharing their experience. More attention is being devoted to the issue of victim-blaming as well as the instances of shaming women for the way they act sexually, both of which are greatly discussed topics nowadays and both can prove as excessively hurtful to the victims of sexual trauma.

5. Trauma in Literature

Trauma can manifest in various ways and there are many ways in which the authors of fiction may decide to picture their characters, who can show signs of trauma based on the author`s choice and goals. The purpose of trauma use in literature depends on the author and their aim as to what they want to point out to the readers, be it the social or cultural context, or as a tool to induce fear and anxiety in readers, as it might be in literature with gothic features. As written by Balaev, portraying characters is the most frequent way to convey the notions of trauma, as the protagonists can pose as a “representative cultural figure”¹⁰⁵, meaning that the characters can stand for a specific group of trauma affected individuals. In the novels analysed in this

¹⁰³ Schönfelder, *Words and Wounds*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” 155.

paper, one could realise the target groups might include people who were subjected to childhood maltreatment as well as issues present in relationships, or to sexual abuse.

Though according to Eyerman there have been questions raised about the appropriateness of the expression of trauma in literature, for instance holocaust, namely, and whether the authors possess the right to write about traumatic events, or whether should authors remain wordless,¹⁰⁶ there are also individual authors who suggest trauma should be faced in a direct manner.¹⁰⁷ What is more, as Heidarizadeh claims, literature itself is a powerful tool providing insight into the minds of people including “memories, introspection, retrospection, flashback and awful remembrances that are coloured by pain, wound and trauma.”¹⁰⁸ Literary texts therefore also give way to the authors to explore the minds of their characters, both in the good way and the bad. As she further insists, contemporary literature and its narratives are full of stress and anxiety as the today’s period is the “time of producing the plot of anxiety in modern world.”¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, it is important to point out that trauma, traumatic events and trauma manifestation serve as a powerful tool for authors to evoke emotions in readers. It is possible to induce fear, sympathy or antipathy, to make the readers question their own life and thus provoke feelings of anxiety and uneasiness as well as to enhance suspense. However, it is necessary to draw a line where the use of trauma can actually help the readers, and where it can do more damage than good. Charles for instance insists that “the dangers in writing about sexual assault, where it becomes more harmful than helpful, are realized when rape or sexual abuse is used for titillation or dramatic effect in a novel,”¹¹⁰ while claiming that all authors, wishing to use sexual abuse in their writings, should always stay true to the motif and the consequences it might bring upon the victims.¹¹¹ The author thus aims to point out the possible abuse of the motif for their purposes of writing the novel and the possible indifference towards the real victims of abuse, which could end up even more hurt by the topic. When it comes to the two analysed novels in this paper, it is safe to claim that the author, Flynn, truly attempts to portray the abuse taking place together with its outcomes and while Flynn might use the trauma to evoke negative

¹⁰⁶ Eyerman, “Social Theory and Trauma,” 48.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Negin Heidarizadeha, “The Significant Role of Trauma in Literature and Psychoanalysis”, in *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, published 2015, 788.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Amanda Charles, “Sexual Assault and its Impacts in Young Adult Literature” in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* vol. 12, published December 2019, 101.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

feelings in readers, the author also writes in such a manner, that feelings of compassion and understanding are evoked as well.

One of the authors analysing the occurrence of trauma in literature is for instance Schönfelder, who, in her work, provides a general summary of the use of trauma in several novels. The author for instance shows the childhood trauma expressed in several of the texts, while pointing out to the lack of security provided to the characters within the context of a family as well as both physical and emotional abuse.¹¹² The occurrence of these topics thus shows the authors preoccupation with trauma occurring at a young age while exploring the following consequences for the characters in the various pieces of work.

Furthermore, Schönfelder claims that the authors who use trauma in their work are “profoundly concerned with the complex psychology of their protagonists and the process of narrating the traumatic past.”¹¹³ The authors thus try to work out the effect trauma has on their characters, following the development of their behaviour which might be rooted in their trauma as well as attempt to depict the instances which were deeply traumatizing for their characters. As Schönfelder adds, the aim of the texts also corresponds with the experiment exploring “whether or not and to what extent it is possible to heal wounds by expressing them in words.”¹¹⁴ Schönfelder`s question might thus point out to the possibility of interconnection of the characters and the authors of the novels for whom putting the words onto the paper might serve as a sort of therapy. Writing might thus give one freedom from their scary traumatic past or it might serve as an instrument to gain control, be it only seemingly correct.

Additionally, Ross focuses on children`s literature and attempts to summarize how important the depiction of trauma in children`s literature actually is and how it can provide readers with safety, together with “the importance of readers having accurate representation of self in literature.”¹¹⁵ The author directly quotes Markland in her research, claiming that “the depiction of potential trauma in children`s literature becomes safe because readers are reassured that characters will enjoy happiness for the foreseeable future,”¹¹⁶ and that “trauma can be

¹¹² Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 9.

¹¹³ Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 9-10.

¹¹⁴ Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 10.

¹¹⁵ Kyla Ross, “Trauma in Children`s Literature” in *Graduate Research Papers*, published 2020, 11.

¹¹⁶ Ross, “Trauma in Children`s Literature,” 12.

overcome,”¹¹⁷ giving readers hope about their own possibly experienced trauma and reassuring them that there is the possibility to heal. However, even though the novels *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects* largely incorporate the motif of childhood trauma into the story, they are not written for children, and the positive attitude towards trauma is not present.

However, as Schönfelder stresses, there are several disagreements as to how the term “trauma” could be possibly used. The author mentions that there might be a difference between the demonstration of trauma within the context of “trauma fiction” and the context of literary and cultural theory.¹¹⁸ The author for instance argues that when trauma is explored in the sense of psychology and accentuates the suffering of the individual, it is in contrast with “leading currents of literary trauma studies.”¹¹⁹ In literary trauma studies, the author claims, trauma can be expressed through for instance broken language or breakdown of words.¹²⁰

To continue, the author is perplexed with the journey of the term “trauma” from medicine and psychiatry to literature, where Schönfelder questions whether the term “has become an empty signifier”¹²¹ and is thus unclear what it refers to, and further weighs the option of choosing different terms as a substitution.¹²² However, the author continues with a claim that there might not be a term as powerful as trauma is.¹²³

In order to explain the true meaning of trauma in literature and its power, the author chooses to evaluate its use in Romantic and Postmodern literature. The author further chooses this distinction to show that the notion of trauma is not timely solely in the context of the twentieth century, but that it is applicable to the Romantic fiction as well, which might have been passed by literary trauma studies authors due to the fact that the topic of “trauma culture” and “wound culture” arrived into prominence primarily during the Postmodern era.¹²⁴ The notion of trauma might thus have been left out when it came to the analysis of Romantic fiction as it was principally connected to Postmodernity.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 10.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 10.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 14.

However, as the author writes, it is possible to identify notions of trauma in Romantic fiction, however, without the term “trauma” being used specifically. Schönfelder for instance suggests that the writer Mary Shelley herself used to focus on exploring “individual experiences that are severely distressing, painful and/or shocking” in her novels,¹²⁵ all of which correspond to what one would nowadays call a traumatic experience, and in addition, Shelley in her novels furthermore searched for the “complex and persistent effects of those experiences.”¹²⁶ As was previously mentioned, traumatic events are known to leave long-term scars on the victim’s physical as well as mental state, thus it is possible to find great analogy of the term trauma used in contemporary literary studies and for instance the Romantic texts chosen by Schönfelder by analysis. The evolution of the concept of trauma thus is not solely applicable for contemporary literature only.

To further elaborate on the topic of trauma in fiction, Balaev mentions the frequently analysed instances which depict the manners in which victims of trauma, in literature the characters, answer to these stressful moments and how their psyche is furthermore influenced by the experience.¹²⁷ Therefore, it is possible to claim that both Balaev and Schönfelder perceive literature as capable of presenting the true damaging effects of traumatic experience to the readers, thus capable of shedding light on the contemporary issue and bringing it into the public awareness. In addition, Balaev focuses on the role traumatic experience plays when it comes to structuring one’s perception of self as well as their way of recalling past experiences.¹²⁸ Such claim might also suggest that the authors are able to express the immense influence which trauma can pose on the way identity is shaped, all through their chosen characters.

Additionally, Schönfelder mentions the reference used in the novels to point to the distressing experiences occurring in the story and claims that the word “wound” is used and the author is capable of finding an analogy of the “image of mental or psychological injury [...] to later notions of psychological trauma.”¹²⁹ Therefore, one might be able to observe the link between novels incorporating traumatic events and their outcomes written before the term trauma was coined and investigated in literary trauma studies and those written in the Postmodern era. To continue, similarly to Balaev, the author carries on by writing that Romantic trauma novels

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” 155.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 14.

frequently dwell on the idea of identity being shaped by how one remembers the past,¹³⁰ which is true for traumatic experience and their consequences as well. The author literally writes that “these novels feature narrators who strive to understand how their past and their memories affect their present sense of self.”¹³¹ All such tendencies occur in contemporary trauma fiction as well, therefore it is possible to say that writing and reading about a traumatized character is only natural as it gives the writer space to explore the effect it has on their characters as well as an ability to evoke emotions in readers, while for readers the need for identification might also play a role.

Another author, Birlik, quotes Eagleton, who also believes that even though trauma in literature can refer to other topics such as politics, ideologies or struggling economically responsible for causing distress, but also describing literature as expressing other, more personal aspects of trauma, such as interpersonal relationships as well as “human personality,” when modern literature is taken into account.¹³² Therefore, what the author is suggesting is that even though social aspects are of great importance in literature, the same attention needs to be paid to the aspects of human personality, or identity and their ability to sustain and form relationships with others as well. Such topics can be analysed in the chosen pieces of literature and are to a great extent explored by Flynn in both the novels, as will be further on mentioned.

To continue with trauma fiction, Schönfelder believes that in Romantic novels, Gothic elements are of great importance when it comes to expressing “a fascination with the pathological as ultimately uncontrollable.”¹³³ In this case, it is possible to state that pathological can be explained as the consequences of traumatic event or long-term abuse, which now haunt the characters and take away their peace. Such reality might give a handle to the writer when their wish to evoke all sorts of emotions in their readers ranging from pity or uncertainty to fear and complete dread, which is also suggested by Balaev, who claims that such works of literature provide the authors with the possibility to depict deep instances of “loss” as well as “intense fear” of individual characters or of entire groups of people.¹³⁴ According to both authors, one

¹³⁰ Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 15.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Nurten Birlik, „Psychology and Literature“ in *Literature and Psychology: Writing, Trauma and the Self*, ed. Önder Çakirtas (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 3.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” 150.

would claim that overwhelming, confusing, negative emotions are of great importance when attempting to portray trauma in literature.

However, individual trauma as such is not the sole type of trauma explored in Romantic novels, as Schönfelder believes. The author furthermore claims that some of the novels also focus on different spheres, such as the “political dimension” of trauma, which is, similarly to individual traumatic events, capable of inflicting “trauma, pain, suffering and existential crises,”¹³⁵ through for instance the inequity of women and men, or through problematic family politics.¹³⁶ It is thus clear that both individual and collective trauma find their place within the context of Romantic fiction and both of them are up to date even in contemporary fiction.

Similarly to Schönfelder, Balaev decides to elaborate on the idea of collectively experienced trauma present in literature, writing that in specific works of fiction, the authors frequently investigate the clash between characters based on memory coined both in the personal as well as cultural sphere, while also mentioning the interconnection of events as perceived by an individual and the “larger cultural context.”¹³⁷ One could thus perceive Balaev’s claim as a suggestion that individual traumata are in a way rooted in the way a society or a group of people perceives individual events and the ways in which these instances are remembered. Such suggestion may be further supported by Balaev’s insisting on the fact that both individual traumatic experience as well as collective ones are mutually interlinked.¹³⁸ Therefore, one would structure their identity not solely on their individual experience, but also on learnt experience from their parents or society in general. Such reality is to be analysed in *Sharp Objects*, where the little town has long been plagued with violence towards children and women.¹³⁹

To continue, Balaev further believes that due to the fact that the way collective and individual traumatic experiences are interconnected, the clear line between the victim and the aggressor gets rather indistinct, since everyone reacts to various traumata in their own manner.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, one could perceive the abuse one inflicts upon others as rooted in the aggressors own

¹³⁵ Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 15.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” 150.

¹³⁸ Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” 153.

¹³⁹ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 213.

¹⁴⁰ Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” 154.

previous trauma, which formed their behaviour as well as identity in such a way, therefore making them both victims and villains. Concerning the novels analysed in this thesis, one could perceive similar behaviour in the character of Amy in the novel *Gone Girl*, who poses both as a victim of childhood trauma¹⁴¹, just as much as she is the antagonist both in the story and in her marriage with Nick.

When it comes to postmodern fiction, however, Schönfelder stands with her opinion that postmodern fiction is greatly preoccupied with the idea of politics, when it comes to trauma writing. The author believes that such fiction lost its playfulness, but that it on the other hand enables the marginalized and voiceless people to be heard, while it also finally gives space to wounds, pain and suffering to come to the surface after a long time of being suppressed and ignored “under the great narratives of history.”¹⁴² According to Schönfelder, it is possible to say, postmodern fiction might be focused more on the collective trauma stemming from oppression and ignorance, while it also tries to let those, who were hurt by such treatment, have their agency in writing. This might also be true for those who lost their homes, who suffered under a harsh regime or violence, or those affected by an economic crisis.

Additionally, to more profoundly explore the work in which trauma plays an important role, it is vital to look at its narrative techniques. Schönfelder for instance names self-reflexivity as a significant aspect used in works of trauma writing.¹⁴³ It is thus clear that a lot of thinking about one`s actions and behaviour takes place in the works while the character considers whether some actions of theirs were a right thing to do or whether they are good natured human beings. What is more, Schönfelder also mentions how the works “challenge processes of remembering, narration, and representation.”¹⁴⁴ This also corresponds to the fact which was mentioned earlier in this paper, victims of trauma might find their memories blurred in a way, they might find themselves unable to make sense of the experience and thus it is problematic for them to speak about it as well as understand what their consequent emotions or for instance reactions mean.

Consecutively, language itself also serves as a powerful tool within the works of trauma fiction. Schönfelder for instance claims that postmodern writings are in a way more experimentative,

¹⁴¹ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 38.

¹⁴² Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 16.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

than for instance Romanic fiction, and states that language has become an aspect to which contemporary authors decided to pay more attention.¹⁴⁵ As was already mentioned, the consequences of traumatic experience or event might be expressed through broken language in the writings, referring again to the character`s fragmentation of their personality, soul or mental state.

In addition, concerning the topics within which trauma is explored, Schönfelder insists that the idea of childhood trauma is prominent within postmodern fiction. These themes include the events belonging to the individual traumatic experiences, such as “sexual abuse, incest and domestic violence.”¹⁴⁶ The author then explains the reason for this occurrence, and that due to the fact that Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, shortened as PTSD, was finally described as a “diagnostic category within the field of psychiatry.”¹⁴⁷ It might thus be taken as a kind of reaction to this branch of medicine as well as the description of what the victims have to go through. As was previously mentioned, thanks to this formulation, the stigma surrounding the idea of mental health problems was eventually decreased, with which the occurrence in literature might have helped as well.

To continue, as was previously mentioned, the women`s movement helped a lot with bringing the terrors of domestic trauma to the public attention, but what is more, thanks to the emancipation movements, more literature with similar topic began to emerge. As Schönfelder believes, traumas happening in childhood and traumas stemming from family environments are narrowly connected,¹⁴⁸ meaning that they might appear to somebody as greatly similar, however, when it comes to family trauma in particular, there are some differences to be distinguished. Among these, the author assigns for instance the fact that the term trauma might denote slightly different connotations.¹⁴⁹ First of all, the author describes family trauma as “denoting individual traumatic experiences that happen within the context of the family” while it might also “express how the whole family may be affected by an individual`s trauma and how, in particular, interpersonal trauma within a family tends to shatter the group`s sense of safety and stability.”¹⁵⁰ In the first sense, one would perceive the family trauma in the sense of

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 17.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Schönfelder, *Wounds and Words*, 18.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

individual trauma, however, the second connotation seems to be of more collective nature, as it includes the whole group who suffer from the experience. What is more, it might also bring one back to the topic of caregiving, which was mentioned previously, where the person who needs help subsequently deteriorates and leaves the family feeling heartbroken and even empty.

On the other hand, according to Bhattacharya, the portrayal of abuse towards women and other instances of sexual violence, have become widely used in fiction, however, the question is who is allowed to use it in their texts. The author specifically writes that in literary texts, “the use of violence against women is only a literary device, it is used to shock and disturb its readers.”¹⁵¹ The additional value of the attempt to allow readers to find understanding or the possibility to identify with the characters is thus not assumed. To further elaborate on the topic, Bhattacharya chooses to analyse the contemporary novel *My Absolute Darling* by Gabriel Tallent and the series by George R. R. Martin, *The Song of Ice and Fire*, both of which are greatly popular nowadays, both of which are, however, written from the view of male authors and without any space for understanding the victims, or even normalising the concept of sexual abuse.¹⁵² The author thus aims to take into consideration how much of the trauma depicted is written for the purpose of allowing the readers to feel included in the story, or whether the purpose is simply a tool to make readers uncomfortable, anxious or terrified.

Furthermore, Novey contributes to the topic of sexual trauma depicted in literature by focusing on the role silence, following a traumatizing event, plays in literary texts. The author chooses several novels in which one can analyse the consequences of sexual assaults and insists that for instance the author of poems, “Jordan captures the pervasive racism and misogyny that lead victims of assault to become resigned to what – to others – presents as silence.”¹⁵³ According to Novey, another author, O’Connor, uses silence as a tool to depict the fragmentation of the character’s mental state and in their “story gives primacy to the sensorial memory that is the legacy of the assault, the images and words that will haunt the character for the rest of their life.”¹⁵⁴ The silence presented in novels is thus an important aspect of literature which authors

¹⁵¹ Bhattacharya Deya, “Portrayal of Violence Against Women In Literary Fiction”, *The Curious Reader*, published November 23, 2018. <https://www.thecuriousreader.in/features/violence-against-women/>

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Idra Novey, “The Silence of Sexual Assault in Literature”, *The Paris Review*, published October 4, 2018.

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/10/04/the-silence-of-sexual-assault-in-literature/>

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

might use to provide space for understanding and provoke compassion for victims of sexual trauma.

What is more, as Lejkowski considers the influence trauma has on the characters, the author distinguishes between male and female characters, claiming that “the characters close themselves off from the personal trauma they experience. The male protagonists run from it, while the girls are forced to hide within their own minds.”¹⁵⁵ Therefore, in other words, female characters are more prone to showing signs of silence, when it comes to coping with traumatizing memories, which can be due to the stigma surrounding mental health or the previously mentioned misogyny. However, another author, Wai-yee Li suggests that women can also pose as expressing the voice of abused women, where the female character functions “both *as* the one offering judgement and the one being judged,”¹⁵⁶ meaning that women in literature might not only be those silenced, but also those who provide some clarity to the readers, when it comes to previous trauma. When it comes to male characters, the instance of running from their traumas correlates with the socially accepted male roles as well as the fact that men are believed not to be showing emotions, as that would be perceived as feminine. Such presupposition possesses the power to be traumatizing by themselves, but their portrayal in literature can be helpful to the readers.

Additionally, another author, John, also writes about the idea of mental health within the context of literature and mentions the influence on Freud on the Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism, suggesting that the viewpoint of psychology might not necessarily be linked to the author, but that it is possible to analyse the characters in a psychological manner, as one would do with a real-life person.¹⁵⁷ The literary texts might thus serve as an intriguing source for analysis even in the context of trauma survivors, enabling psychoanalysts to do their research on the characters.

Concerning the social context, trauma is a topic which has become widely discussed in the recent years. Society grew more informed about and more interested in mental health thanks to

¹⁵⁵ Richard Lejkowski, *Childhood Trauma and The Imagination in American Literature* (Camden: Graduate School-Camden Rutgers, May 2012), 87.

¹⁵⁶ Wai-yee Li, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 393.

¹⁵⁷ Merin Susan John, “Analysis of Memory, Gender, and Identity in Psychological Thrillers With Specific Reference to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* and James Mangold’s *Identity*” in *Middle Eastern Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences* 1 (2), published 2020, 5. <https://doi.org/10.47631/mejress.v1i2.9>.

the reduction of stigma surrounding mental health problems and it has captured the interest of many authors as it provides them with a possibility to explore the topic of trauma through their characters. Furthermore, people are becoming more aware of the issues stemming from various traumatic events and of their frequency in contemporary society and the topic of trauma has thus become a rather universal topic, where readers get the chance to identify with the characters and therefore the topic became more popular.

Lastly, as was previously mentioned, trauma also enables the readers to feel included in the plot or in the lives of characters, since they get to view their darkest memories. Collective trauma also stems from an event that caused problems to a greater public or is widely recognized. As Lejkowski for instance insists that “authors are compelled to depict past trauma because the effects are persistent” while quoting Vickroy, claiming that there is an aim trauma fiction attempts to reach, and that is to “heal or inform.”¹⁵⁸ The authors thus do not always possess the power to help readers heal from their personal traumas, however, they can pose as an accessible source of information either for the victims of trauma, or the general public, helping them gain understanding.

6. Trauma in Psychological Thrillers

Firstly, it is useful to provide a little insight into the development of the genre. The psychological thriller, as perceived by Mecholsky, is to be perceived as “the most modern and the most postmodern of literary forms” mostly due to its demonstration of what actually differentiates the modern period from the history.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Lejkowski, *Childhood Trauma and The Imagination in American Literature*, 87.

¹⁵⁹ Kristopher Mecholsky, “The Psychological Thriller: An Overview” in *Critical Insights: The American Thriller*, Ed. Gary Hoppensand (Ipswich: Salem Press, 2014), 2.

Thrillers, when compared to horrors, often manage to evoke fear, dread, anxiety and other negative emotions in readers while overwhelming them with suspense. Mecholsky for instance suggests that the genre can be described as self-contradictory, expressing the problematics of the mind, where it is on one hand facile to “understand the mind”, while on the other hand it might at the same time prove impossible.¹⁶⁰ However, when it comes to psychological thrillers, the events provoking such feelings are often originate in one`s psyche through abuse, neglect, manipulation or for instance self-harming mechanisms. The readers are able to identify with the characters, fearing for the characters` well-being, while also imagining the terrifying and not at all unrealistic situation the characters are finding themselves in. That is what makes the narratives even more dreadful.

At the same time, the characters might appear as scary and dangerous to themselves as well as others and the readers are often left confused as to what is going on in the character`s mind. Traumatized characters can thus also be pictured as villains, when it comes to thrillers. John for instance insists that mental illnesses themselves are a rather interesting theme to exploit, as the “public has a perception of mental illness as violence and the belief that every mentally-ill person harbours great dark secrets within them.”¹⁶¹ By this the author wishes to express the way in which similar stereotypes help creators of psychological thrillers to establish precisely the atmosphere they aim for, as the author`s exact words are that this very perception “is the first aspect that creates suspense in the people to watch [...] such narratives,”¹⁶² or in the case of *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects*, both read and watch.

To continue, there are other aspects of trauma to be found in writings of psychological thrillers which give way to suspense and the overall anxious atmosphere. John for instance mentions the “identity crisis in a person and their personality,”¹⁶³ which might give way to dark thoughts for the readers and make them experience the changeable, unstable and unsafe environment of one`s own brain. Furthermore, the author also speaks of double personality, flashbacks and fading identity as frequent traits to be found in characters of the genre of psychological thriller.¹⁶⁴ As was already mentioned, flashbacks are prevalent signs of trauma to be diagnosed

¹⁶⁰ Mecholsky, “The Psychological Thriller: An Overview“, 1.

¹⁶¹ John, “Analysis of Memory, Gender, and Identity in Psychological Thrillers With Specific Reference to Alfred Hitchcock`s *Spellbound* and James Mangold`s *Identity*“, 3.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

in trauma survivors as well as the fact that the person who has undergone a traumatic event might feel as if their identity is shattering, leaving them with doubts about themselves, which might also contribute to the feeling of double personality, perceived both by the person or the onlookers, which might be further induced by various harmful coping mechanisms, as for instance drug abuse or alcohol intake.

Furthermore, the genre of psychological thrillers gives way to authors to investigate the topic of personality disorders stemming from various traumatic experiences. John for instance states that a specific personality disorder, stemming from childhood trauma, causes the characters to suffer from memory issues, personality issues as well as problems with their identity.¹⁶⁵ According to the author, such “narratives [...] are written in wide range and are always from different perspectives.”¹⁶⁶ However, the author weighs the issues stemming from such narratives, arguing that since such narratives possess the ability to transfer “the readers or the audience to another world of internal human drama” and since the characters are frequently “portrayed in texts as dangerous to society by giving them the face of evil,” the readers might feel as if they are being alerted about these people, rather than that asked for understanding and sympathy for the characters.¹⁶⁷ It seems that narratives of psychological thrillers thus possibly aim for evoking negative emotions in readers, rather than trying to spread general awareness about the suffering of the victims. This is also to be analysed in the texts of *Gone Girl* and *Sharp Objects* later on in this thesis, with a somehow two-sided result.

All of these instances of psychological distress fit in the common motifs occurring in the narratives of this genre. According to Mecholsky, the most frequently occurring themes include “psychotic protagonists, children in danger, psychotic antagonists [...] who often seem beyond the reach of law, crucial scenes that depict psychological torture, unreliable narrators, psychotic parents, spouses, trauma or memory loss in a main character as well as past traumas revisiting the character.”¹⁶⁸ The author further adds that when it comes to psychotic characters, they often seem innocent at first sight¹⁶⁹ surprising thus both the other characters as well as the readers. Many of these suggested motifs take place in both the novels analysed in this paper, fitting thus

¹⁶⁵ John, “Analysis of Memory, Gender, and Identity in Psychological Thrillers With Specific Reference to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* and James Mangold’s *Identity*”, 6.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Mecholsky, “The Psychological Thriller: An Overview”, 1.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

into the genre of a psychological thriller and using the traumatic experiences of the characters to foreshadow their psychological state, their vulnerabilities but also dangers they pose to their surroundings.

7. Trauma in the Novel *Sharp Objects*

The novel *Sharp Objects* tells a story of the protagonist, Camille Preaker, who returns to her childhood home, little town, to write a story about several cases of missing children, only to revisit her hurtful memories from her childhood and adolescence, which revolve around various traumatic experiences, including toxic family environment, loss of a sibling and sexual assault. Violence towards women is a central issue discussed in the novel, as well as the childhood experiences of several of the characters and the occurrence of trauma within a rural community.

To begin with, the story itself opens with Camille writing a report of four locked up and neglected children. The children aged “two through six, were found locked in a room on the South Side with a couple of tuna sandwiches and a quart of milk. They`d been left three days, flurrying like chickens over the food and feces on the carpet. Their mother had wandered off for a suck on the pipe and just forgotten.”¹⁷⁰ The fact that this is one of the first sentences the reader gets to know from the protagonist, Camille, is in itself an indicator as to what extent the motif of neglected and abused children as well as a dysfunctional family is central to the novel.

What is more, another sign is given to the readers when Camille`s manager, Curry, informs Camille about his intention to send her to her childhood town, Wind Gap, where she is about to conduct her research for her new article concerning the murder of a little girl and another one`s disappearance.¹⁷¹ When asked about Wind Gap, Camille describes her hometown as a town where “now its biggest business is hog butchering”, where “about two thousand people live”, adding a comment that it is a place where one finds mostly “old money and trash.”¹⁷² One could imagine the protagonist`s opinion on the town, condemning its smallness and lack of development, telling the readers that she “still didn`t want to go. So much so, apparently, that

¹⁷⁰ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 7.

¹⁷¹ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 13.

¹⁷² Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 11.

she`s wrapped her hands around the arms of her chair,”¹⁷³ and after Camille decides she will go, she says that “her hands left sweatprints on the chair.”¹⁷⁴ The readers already get an idea that the protagonist is really reluctant to return to Wind Gap. However, the readers find out later on throughout the plot that the town`s smallness as well as the recent tragic events are not the only issue Camille has with the town.

To return to the topic of childhood trauma, it is a recurring theme throughout the whole novel, gradually revealing the mental state of the characters as well as the reasons for their behaviours. As was previously mentioned, experience encountered in childhood possess the power to shape the person`s identity into the future. Such is the case of the protagonist, whose childhood and adolescence were full of damaging events.

First of all, one of the initial breakpoints for Camille was when her little sister, Marian, died after a long time of not being well. Camille and her sister`s relationship was full of love and compassion and Marian`s death was a source of great trauma for the protagonist, leaving her feeling lost and devastated. Camille experiences many memories of her time with Marian, however, most of them are coloured with darkness, such as Camille seeing her deceased sister when she was on her way to greet her. “Marian died on my thirteenth birthday. I woke up, padded down the hall to say hello – always the first thing I did – and found her, eyes open, blanket pulled up to her chin. I remember not being that surprised. She`d been dying for as long as I can remember.”¹⁷⁵

“Marian was a sweet series of diseases. She had trouble breathing from the start, would wake in the night spluttering for air, splotchy and gray. I could hear her like a sick wind down the hall from me, in the bedroom next to my mother. Lights would click on and there would be cooing, or sometimes crying and shouting.”¹⁷⁶ Camille`s childhood has thus been full of sadness from the very beginning; however, such emotions prevail to the present. When she speaks to John Keene, whose sister was found to be murdered, the characters conduct a conversation on the topic of losing a beloved sibling. “`You`re the only person who understands, I think,` he said. `What it`s like to lose a sister and be expected to just deal. Just move on. Have you *gotten*

¹⁷³ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 13.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 112.

¹⁷⁶ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 139.

over it?' [...] 'You'll never get over it,' I said. 'It infects you. It ruined me.'"¹⁷⁷ The protagonist has thus not only been in the presence of a dying and suffering child, her beloved sister, but she has also been expected by the town to not suffer any consequences, which shows the stigma surrounding the topic of mental health within the town's community.

However, the death of Marian was not the sole reason for Camille's mental health issues. The protagonist has also been the overlooked daughter due to Marian's sickness, but also due to her mother's, whom Camille calls by her first name, Adora, personal issues. Camille confesses her feelings to the readers, saying: "As a child, I doesn't remember ever telling Adora my favourite color, or what I'd like to name my daughter when I grew up. I don't think she ever knew my favorite dish, and I certainly never padded down to her room in the early-morning hours, teary from nightmares."¹⁷⁸ According to Fadilla, the protagonist even suffers from PTSD, possibly due to her foul relationship with her mother.¹⁷⁹ The protagonist never experienced a childhood full of love, rather than that, her early years were full of neglect and ignorance from her mother, and the only source of compassion was her sister Marian, who eventually also left her.

The protagonist further elaborates on her cold relationship with her mother, when she tells the readers that "she always feels sad for the girl that she was, because it never occurred to her that her mother might comfort her."¹⁸⁰ Camille has thus been love starved from the very beginning. The readers are also presented with a conversation taking place between Adora and Camille, where Adora puts herself to the position of the victim, blaming Camille for her allegedly mean behaviour towards her as a little child. "I think I finally realized why I don't love you" she said. I knew she didn't, but I'd never heard her admit as much. [...] 'My mother never loved me, either. And if you girls won't love me, I won't love you.'"¹⁸¹ Adora thus puts her children into the position of those responsible for her indifference towards them, which is a perfect example of victim blaming. She further says to Camille: "You were always so wilful, never sweet,"¹⁸² as a response to Camille's claim that her mother never offered her anything but coldness¹⁸³. Therefore, Adora again does not show any sign of affection towards her daughter, just blame.

¹⁷⁷ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 396.

¹⁷⁸ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 175.

¹⁷⁹ Mega Fadilla, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Gillian Flynn's Sharp Objects* (Surabaya: Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, 2020).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 288.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

The conversation continues as follows: “Even from the beginning you disobeyed, wouldn’t eat. Like you were punishing me for being born. Made me look like a fool. Like a child. [...] And now you come back and all I can think of is ‘Why Marian and not her?’”¹⁸⁴ Adora here straightforwardly tells Camille she would rather if she has died instead of her sister, which is a very hurtful case of abuse towards her daughter. Such reality, when happening within the family environment, which should be one’s safe place, leaves the child without knowing what a mother-daughter relationship should feel like and often negatively changes their ability to form and keep healthy, lasting relationships with mutual respect.

Such is the case with Camille as well. When she forms a kind of relationship with the detective, Richard, who is also working on the case, the protagonist of the novel confides in the readers with the long time she formed any kind of intimate connection. “It was the first time I’d been with a man in ten years.”¹⁸⁵ However, her inability to form healthy relationships is not solely based on her tough childhood and flawed relationship with her mother, there is much more to Camille’s constraint, such as her experience with boys from her childhood as well as her self-confidence, which can be rooted in her ever-lasting feeling of not being good enough, founded in her relationship with her mother. When it comes to mutual respect, it is obvious that when it comes to Camille, she mostly lacks respect for herself in different spheres of daily life, even her work. “In my two years on the job I’d consistently fallen short of expectations. Sometimes strikingly,”¹⁸⁶ is a claim occurring right in the first several pages of the novel, expressing the protagonist’s perception of self.

When it comes to her adolescence and the event that shapes the protagonist’s present identity, one might come to the decision that it is a reflection of the way trauma is present in the US society. As was previously mentioned, it is not entirely uncommon for children under the age of eighteen in the rural societies to encounter sexual abuse, just as it is not uncommon to either experience or be a witness of sexual assault when in college. In the novel, Camille first shares with Richard her experience of rape without actually saying it was her who was assaulted. “Once, an eight-grade girl got drunk at a high-school party and four of five guys on the football

¹⁸⁴ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 289.

¹⁸⁵ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 308.

¹⁸⁶ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 14.

team had sex with her, kind of passed her around. Does that count?”¹⁸⁷ With the question it is confirmed that Camille was probably taught that a girl who was sexually assaulted has no right to complain. Such instance has a lot to do with victim-blaming, which is a frequent, contemporary phenomenon where the victim is made to believe that they brought the trauma on themselves. What is more, Larsen and their colleagues specifically mention that “research suggested that many adult survivors of sexual abuse had gone on to experience difficulty forming healthy relationships. These victims often blamed themselves for the abuse, which made it difficult to come to terms with the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of that type of violation”¹⁸⁸ which again refers to the burdensomeness and heaviness of the survivors` endeavour to make sense of the events which have taken place. Additionally, the author also insists that the victims frequently feel others might not be trustworthy, while they tend towards isolation as well as “difficulty forming safe attachments.”¹⁸⁹ To further elaborate on the protagonist`s uncertainty as well as inability to come to terms with the event she has encountered as well as the fact that she has been severely wronged, Camille says that “she just didn`t know if that counted as outright violence,”¹⁹⁰ which furthermore suggests the trivialization which often follows violence against women, more so in conformist communities of little isolated towns.

On the other hand, the detective, who acts as a kind of representation of the larger city of Kansas City, as compared to the small-mindedness of Wind Gap. Some of the archaic standpoints of the town`s mentality is shown throughout the story. Once, when Camille wonders about the murder of Ann Nash, she mentions the town`s inclination towards stereotypes. “If Ann was a true girl of Wind Gap, a town that demands utmost femininity in its fairer sex, she`d have worn her hair long down her back.”¹⁹¹ Such mentality can influence a person growing up in similar communities and shaping their perception of selves and the world. It is visible in his and Camille`s interaction that Richard does not understand Camille`s attitude towards the sexual assault she was describing. “Yeah, I`d count a bunch of punks raping a thirteen-year-old outright violence, yes I sure would,”¹⁹² he answers to Camille and later on even cynically refers

¹⁸⁷ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 213.

¹⁸⁸ Carly D. Larsen, Jonathan G. Sandberg, James M. Harper, and Roy Bean. “The Effects of Childhood Abuse on Relationship Quality: Gender Differences and Clinical Implications” in *Family Relations* 60, no. 4 (2011): 436. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41236779>.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 213.

¹⁹¹ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 30.

¹⁹² Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 213.

to the phenomenon of victim blaming by saying that “he is surprised she wasn’t made to apologize for allowing them to rape her in the first place,”¹⁹³ which is basically a reference to the narrow-mindedness of the rural communities and their lack of capability to show compassion and understanding to a person who recently suffered a terrible trauma.

However, when it comes to the consequences of trauma and the poor mental state the victims find themselves in after having to endure traumatizing events or experience, the clash between a city mentality and one of rural areas comes into question again when two men, John Keene representing the little town of Wind Gap, and again the detective Richard, both see Camille’s body covered in carved words. Here the city proves as unable to understand and show compassion to those hurt by trauma, not taking into consideration how enduring trauma affects an individual. In the last few pages of the novel, Camille confides in the readers that “she never again heard from Richard. After the way he looked at my marked-up body, I knew I wouldn’t.”¹⁹⁴ Camille’s feeling of certainty that this would be the outcome points out to Richard’s dismayed face when he saw the consequences of long-term trauma, unable to accept them. John Keene, on the other hand, shows signs of understanding, when he sees Camille’s body. “He held up my arms, my legs, turned me on my back. He read me. Said the words out loud, angry and nonsensical both: *oven, queasy, castle*.”¹⁹⁵ After this, the characters continue to experience intimate moments¹⁹⁶ which implies John Keene’s non-judgemental perception of Camille’s self-harm and even understanding. However, in this particular case, the understanding from the side of John Keene, might be due to the fact that both characters had to endure the misunderstanding from the Wind Gap population, meaning that Keene does not represent the town, but rather a victim of the town’s indifference, just as Camille had to endure.

To carry on with the elaboration of how the childhood trauma and teenage experience have affected the protagonist, it is useful to investigate other signs of trauma Camille is suffering from apart from her difficult relationship situation. The character oftentimes has to withstand flashbacks stemming from her terrible memories which took place at least a decade ago now. “I remember pretending to come. I remember a murmur of an orgasm, but that wasn’t until they’d passed me over to the third guy,”¹⁹⁷ referring to the instance of sexual assault Camille

¹⁹³ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 214.

¹⁹⁴ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 476.

¹⁹⁵ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 402.

¹⁹⁶ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 402-403.

¹⁹⁷ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 331.

had to endure when only thirteen years old. As was previously mentioned, these flashbacks provide as a sort of gate back to the hurtful memories and the person enduring them thus has no way out.

More symptoms of trauma Camille suffers from is alcohol abuse. The character consumes hard liquor on multiple occasions throughout the whole novel, usually to be able to relax. After her hurtful conversation with her mother for instance, she confides in the readers. “I drank the rest of the sours and had dark sticky dreams. My mother had cut me open and was unpacking my organs, stacking them in a row on my bed as my flesh flapped to either side. She was sewing her initials into each one of them, then tossing them back into me.”¹⁹⁸ However, even though alcohol might seemingly help the protagonist while awake, it does not stop her from experiencing nightmares, again a sign of trauma oftentimes present in trauma survivors.

“When I woke up, it was past noon, and I was disoriented and afraid. I took a gulp from my flask of vodka to ease the panic.”¹⁹⁹ One can now claim for sure that alcohol abuse in this case is rooted in the protagonist’s trauma and serves as a sort of redemption. However, after the protagonist has to vomit the liquor out and goes to take a bath, she is surrounded with her dark thoughts again. “Would I ever have the discipline to let the water cover my face, drown with my eyes open? Just refuse to lift yourself two inches, and it will be done.”²⁰⁰ The protagonist is therefore a grand example of the way alcohol only seemingly helps with the issues, but ultimately makes the person feel even worse. In Camille’s case, alcohol abuse might even contribute to her suicidal thoughts, which belong to the above-mentioned signs of trauma just as much as for instance flashbacks or the breakdown of one’s identity.

Concerning the fragmentation of one’s identity, which was again already mentioned earlier in this thesis, there are aspects in which the novel discusses this motif as well. Camille, for instance, does not know her true identity, apart from her alcohol abuse, there are several other instances in which it is revealed that the character harms herself on purpose, writing various, though not solely, pejorative words which, according to her, define her personality. “My skin, you see, screams. It’s covered with words – cook, cupcake, kitty, curls – as if knife-wielding first-grader learned to write on my flesh, [...], pulling on a sweater and, in a flash of my wrist:

¹⁹⁸ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 291.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 292.

harmful. Why these words? Thousands of hours of therapy have yielded a few ideas from the good doctors. They are often feminine, [...], or they're flat-out negative. Number of synonyms for anxious carved in my skin: eleven."²⁰¹ Anxiety, as written earlier, is often a symptom rooted in a harmful traumatic event. The protagonist here experienced both long-term trauma as well as a one-time intense traumatic event, which naturally possesses the power to result in an anxious mind. Camille shows more signs of a trauma victim having to cope with the following identity problems, other carved words into her skin being "bad, cry"²⁰² The coping mechanism mentioned, self-harm, gives Camille a sort of illusion of control and relief. As the character puts it: "The one thing I know for sure is that at the time, it was crucial to see these letters on me, and not just see them, but feel them. Burning on my left hip: *petticoat*."²⁰³ It therefore gave the protagonist a way of refuge, just as alcohol does, however, in both cases, the relief is only temporary. As the characters share: "The last word I ever carved into myself, sixteen years after I started: *vanish*."²⁰⁴ The six letters are rather obvious and self-explanatory, the coping mechanisms are in no way a cure to the victim, the trauma always comes back to haunt them, and the word *vanish* is clearly linked to the character's suicidality.

During the novel's story, the protagonist even shares several instances explaining her benevolent admission and her meeting her roommate in a psychiatric hospital, where individuals battling self-harm receive treatment. The memories of Camille's stay in the hospital point to her deteriorating mental health and her addiction to harming herself. There is a point in which her manager, Curry, comes to visit her and Camille recalls the moments. "I scanned his body for anything sharp. A belt buckle, a safety pin, a watch fob."²⁰⁵ The protagonist recalls the moments with feelings of shame and guilt, which is rather typically found in victims of trauma. "When I left I was so sick with myself I vomited in the bathroom, and as I was vomiting, I noticed the rubber covered screws at the back of the toilet. I pried the cap off one and sanded the palm of my hand – *I* – until orderlies hauled me out, blood splurting from the wound like stigmata."²⁰⁶ Camille's need to vomit and to harm herself again thus point to the victim's self-hatred and guilt often prevailing after one is exposed to traumatic events, while also pointing

²⁰¹ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 117.

²⁰² Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 123.

²⁰³ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 118.

²⁰⁴ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 122.

²⁰⁵ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 124.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

out the victim`s attempt to purify herself of the trauma. What is more, there is also the explicit reference to the stigma surrounding the trauma victims and their coping mechanisms.

In addition, the psychiatric hospital serves as another traumatic experience for Camille, even though it should be a safe place, just like her family should have been. However, even in the hospital, the protagonist has to face another loss, the loss of her roommate, who decides to overdose herself.²⁰⁷ This instance only provided another flashback for Camille, which would continue to haunt her. “I could feel the night hanging on me like a soft, damp bedgown and I had a flash of the Illinois hospital, me waking up wet with sweat, a desperate whistle in my ear. My roommate, the cheerleader, on the floor purple and twitching, the bottle of Windex next to her.”²⁰⁸ The protagonist endures her terrible memories over again, every time a little detail reminds her of any of them. Such is the reality for trauma victims, who never find a way out of their haunted minds, filled with traumatic memories.

To continue, Camille, however, is not the sole character with a fragmented personality. When readers get to know her mother, Adora, better throughout the novel, they realize that the antagonist is of two faces. An artificial one, designed for the community, the strangers, and one known only by the members of her family. In the little town, the neighbours hardly have any idea about her hostility, indifference and neglect towards Camille, just as they do not know about her wrongdoings towards Marian, whom she poisoned throughout the years for her own, wicked, selfish purposes. One little instance when Adora unknowingly shifts from one faces to another in front of Camille is when she has her friends over and plays with a baby. “Marian was dead about two years, and my mother had a cluster of friends come over for afternoon drinks. One of them brought a baby. For hours, the child was cooed over, smothered with red-lipstick kisses. [...] My mother finally was handed the baby, and she cuddled it ferociously. *Oh, how wonderful it is to hold a baby again!* Adora jiggled it on her knee, walked it around the rooms, whispered to it, and I looked down from above like a spiteful little god, the back of my hand placed against my face, imagining how it felt to be cheek to cheek with my mother.

When the ladies went into the kitchen to help tidy up the dishes, something changed. I remember my mother, alone in the living room, staring at the child almost lasciviously. She pressed her lips hard against the baby`s apple slice of a cheek. Then she opened her mouth just slightly,

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 350.

took a tiny bit of flesh between her teeth, and gave it a little bite. The baby wailed. The blotch faded as Adora snuggled the child and told the other women it was just being fussy. I ran to Marian`s room and got under the covers.”²⁰⁹ This part of the novel elaborates on the fact that Adora`s personality is not in reality in accordance with the one the antagonist would like it to be in the eyes of her neighbours. Her actions are in contradiction with who she believes herself to be and behaves differently when in public and when left without witnesses. She has therefore constructed an identity which is, however, a complete lie.

Similar, though much more serious case, is revealed almost at the end of the novel, when it is revealed that Adora is directly responsible for Marian`s death, since she used little doses of poison to keep her daughter sick, so that she could take care of her and feel as a needed, caring mother. “Munchausen by Proxy. The caregiver, usually the mother, *almost always* the mother, makes the child ill to get attention for herself. You got Munchausen, you make yourself sick to get attention. You got MBP, you make your child sick to show what a kind, doting mommy you are. [...] Like something a wicked fairy queen would do.”²¹⁰ Adora thus again wants to appeal to her public face, trying to make her look as someone who sacrifices herself for her children. As was previously mentioned, caring for a sick person is very mentally demanding and leaves the caregiver drained, it was not different in this case, as it was brought to attention that Adora started to pluck her eyelashes when Marian started to get worse.²¹¹ However, it never stopped her from continuing with slowly, but surely, murdering her daughter, which might also be the reaction to the damaging stereotypes about female role as the caregiver, as was previously mentioned. Another reason might be her similarly awful relationship with her own mother, who, as she put it, never loved her. Adora thus might have never learnt to care for her children without hurting them.

Additionally, as was previously mentioned, traumatized characters might even be presented in the contemporary novels not as victims, but as the primary villains. Such reality can be damaging to the society as it can cause more harm, however, it is possible that it has the power to induce fear and suspense, as the human mind is really complex, and one might never know what is going on in one`s head. Similarly to the previous claim, there are instances where the traumatized individual turns out to be the villain in the novel *Sharp Objects* as well. Camille`s

²⁰⁹ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 191.

²¹⁰ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 439.

²¹¹ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 52.

stepsister, Amma, has to endure similar ignorance from the side of Adora just as Camille had to, however, there are other ways in which Amma decides to sort her issue out. It is revealed at the end of the novel that Amma is actually the killer in Wind Gap, using the deceased victims' teeth to decorate the floor of her doll house. "We had fun, running around in the woods. We were wild. We'd hurt things together. We killed a cat once. But then she - as always Adora's name went unsaid - got all interested in them. I could never have anything to myself, [...] they started asking me questions about being sick. They were going to ruin everything."²¹² There is therefore a hint to the fact that Amma did everything only to be noticed and loved by Adora, including letting her poison her. "Ann and Natalie died because Adora paid attention to them. Amma could only view it as a raw deal. Amma, who had allowed my mother to sicken her for so long. *Sometimes when you let people do things to you, you're really doing it to them.* Amma controlled Adora by letting Adora sicken her. In return, she demanded uncontested love and loyalty. No other little girls allowed. For the same reasons she murdered Lily Burke. Because, Amma suspected, I liked her better."²¹³ Amma thus would not let her mother neglect her, she wouldn't want to experience the indifference again, she would not leave anyone else enjoy any sympathy from her mother, she was attached, as might happen with people abused for a long time. It drove her to do terrible things and it was all based on her trauma of having an emotionally distant and abusive mother.

To continue, most of the traumas mentioned so far would be classified as individual trauma, however, there are also instances in the novel in which the notions of collective trauma can be analysed as well. Such notions are often visible within the community of Wind Gap, falling prey to the horrendous events taking place in the town. The citizens of the town are continuously reminded of the town's history of violence, which just recently returned to haunt the people of Wind Gap. Apart from the already mentioned sexual assault Camille had to endure, there were other moments of terrible crimes. Such reality is revealed during one of the protagonist's conversations with the detective Richard. "I'm compiling a criminal profile of Wind Gap, a history of the town's violence," he said, flapping a folder at me. "Did you know that in 1975, two teenage girls were found dead at the edge of Falls Creek, very near where Ann Nash turned up, wrists cut? Police ruled it was self-inflicted. Girls were overly close, unhealthily intimate for their age. A homosexual attachment is suspected. But they never found the knife.

²¹² Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 477.

²¹³ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 478.

Weird.”²¹⁴ There thus have already been suspicions of murder, however, the case was closed as suicide, which was clearly incorrect. What is more, commentary about possible homosexuality was added, as if it was a clear reason for suicide. Such prediction must have been damaging to the society both because there was no actual disentanglement of the case and the community were not given either possibility to make sense of the events, nor justice, such as is typical for victims of trauma, but also because homosexuality was again stigmatized during the process, which might inflict additional trauma. Furthermore, the commentary about homosexuality continues to point to the community’s narrow-mindedness as well as unreadiness to stand up for the victims of traumatic events.

To follow the notions of patriarchy and oppression towards women, there are various phenomena occurring within the community of Wind Gap, which can be widely traumatizing. As was mentioned earlier, the town’s girls should always be feminine, which in general can be perceived as oppression. What is more, when it comes to the prejudice towards homosexuality or any sexuality in general, there were instances in the story where the town’s attitude drove a girl to trying to persuade others not to be homosexual so badly, she chose to let several boys have sex with her. “They called her Fag Murray. The boys would take her out after school into the woods and take turns having sex with her. Her mother kills herself, and sixteen years later, Faye has to fuck every boy in school.”²¹⁵

“I don’t follow.”²¹⁶

“To prove she isn’t a lesbian. Like mother, like daughter, right? If she didn’t fuck those boys, no one would have anything to do with her. But she did. So she proved she wasn’t a lesbian, but she was a slut. So no one had anything to do with her. That’s Wind Gap.”²¹⁷ Within the conversation of Camille and Richard, it is again deducible that Wind Gap should present a homophobic community, which can be largely traumatizing to anyone concerned with such topic either directly or through their loved ones. To continue, the fact that the deceased Murray girl’s daughter has to endure the same treatment her mother did proves not only the close-minded society of the town concerning their attitude towards homosexuality as well as their tendency to shame women for their sexual behaviour, but also the possibility to pass on trauma through generations, such as the case with the Murray family. To continue, it is to be seen in

²¹⁴ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 142.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Camille that the community's oppression towards women's sexuality truly internalized itself in her mind, and further lead her to engrave into her body words like "dirty", "whore" and "hollow,"²¹⁸ showing her hurtful perception of herself as well as her lack of self-confidence, which is so frequent among trauma survivors.

To conclude this chapter, it is possible to say that trauma indeed stands in the centre of the novel *Sharp Objects*, while its purposes might vary. As was previously mentioned, an author might decide to use the notions of trauma as a tool to establish dramatic atmosphere and to inflict negative emotions upon readers, which is also the case in *Sharp Objects*, however, the novel and its representation of trauma and its consequences moreover invites compassion and understanding for the character's actions and helps to lower possible judgement received from readers. The fact that the main protagonist, Camille, is a greatly traumatized character whose actions are morally questionable at best while also appealing to the readers with her caring personality may help furthermore challenge the stigma surrounding mental health and risky behaviours. Similar effect can be perceived when it comes to Amma, who is responsible for the local murders, but who is at the same time the victim of her mother's abuse. This disentanglement gives the author the power to show both sides of the villain, while at the same time creating them as not completely antagonistic.

8. Trauma in the novel *Gone Girl*

Just as in Gillian Flynn's novel *Sharp Objects*, trauma and its consequences for the victims is indeed a central motif for the novel *Gone Girl*, however, it is present in a slightly different manner. The characters still show signs of being traumatized since childhood, which influences their contemporary relationships and their ability to sustain them, however, there are other aspects to be analysed, such as the unreliable narrator, economic depression of a town and the effect of financial issues on the society as well as the traumatized male. The story of the novel is at the same time presented from two separate perspectives of the wife and the husband, which helps to build suspense while also gives the readers an opportunity to learn more both about the protagonist, as well as the villain. What is more, there are also several instances of collective trauma portrayed within the story, however, with the notion of individual trauma prevailing throughout the novel.

²¹⁸ Flynn, *Sharp Objects*, 292.

Concerning the collective trauma described in the novel, the town North Carthage in Missouri suffered a financial shock and many of its residents lost their job. The mall which used to be the workplace of many of the people living in the fictional town North Carthage went bankrupt and was at the time of the plot inhabited by some of the previous employees who lost their jobs and were now homeless.²¹⁹ In the book, the protagonist Nick literally claims that “the downfall of the mall basically bankrupted Carthage. People lost their jobs, they lost their houses. No one could see anything good coming anytime soon.”²²⁰ Rautiainen describes the environment as “post 2008 economic recession ruins”, further classifying the town as a “ghost town” residents of which suffer from “feelings of uncertainty and loss.”²²¹ Feeling uncertain as well as lost belong among very frequent emotions experienced by victims of trauma, even more so when getting the situation under control is not within reach, as claimed by the protagonist, after the mall and the shops and jobs within broke down, “it is now two million square feet of echo. No company came to claim it, no businessman promised a resurrection, no one knew what to do with it or what would become of all the people who`d worked there.”²²² The quote itself thus presents the emptiness that hit the town together with its population, evoking feelings of desolation and hopelessness, such as victims of trauma suffer from. Additionally, Johansen mentions the decaying setting of the mall also signifies the disposal of “lifestyles, stable relationships, and attachments to [...] people.”²²³ As was already written about in this thesis, the inability to attain long-lasting relationships may also be rooted in previous trauma, while the disposability of people might also refer to the issue of homelessness in the town of North Carthage.

Furthermore, when it comes to the ruinous setting, Nick, one of the main characters along with his wife, Amy, often spends time describing not only the financial state of the town and the mall bankrupt of which caused so many people to become jobless, but also the abandoned houses in the suburbs, which surround the house belonging to Nick and Amy. Rautiainen for instance chooses a quote from the book where Amy depicts the houses from the neighbourhood,

²¹⁹ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 88.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Emilia Rautiainen, “I Tell a Gothic Tale of Possessiveness and Rage” in *Gillian Flynn’s Gone Girl as an Example of Postmodern Gothic Fiction* (University of Eastern Finland: 2021), 28.

²²² Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 88.

²²³ Emily Johansen, “The Neoliberal Gothic: ‘Gone Girl, Broken Harbor’, and the Terror of Everyday Life” in *Contemporary Literature* 57, no. 1, published 2016, 35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24735057>

including the one of hers and Nick`s, as haunted.²²⁴ To add, Nick stresses the importance to search the mall for those inhabiting it to the police during the investigation of Amy`s disappearance, with the author presenting the readers with an explanation, that “the Blue Book Boys, they all made themselves a nice little town over in the mall. Squatting. Drug dealing. The police run them out every once in a while, but they`re always back next day. Anyway, that`s what I told the lady detective: Search the fucking mall. Because some of them, they gang-raped a girl there a month ago. I mean, you get a bunch of angry men together, and things aren`t too good for a woman that comes across them.”²²⁵ Such description of the town points to the fact that the inhabitants do not feel safe in their hometown, which should be their safe environment, due to the alleged threat present in the abandoned mall. Similarly, Johansen consequently mentions that “Nick dehumanizes the men, transforming them into faceless, animalistic features,”²²⁶ while also blaming the citizens of perceiving the homeless present in the town as “disposable human elements of the recession.”²²⁷ It is therefore possible to claim that the author both tries to point to the small community prejudicial attitudes towards the homeless, since the claim is only a fabricated rumour. On the other hand, though, the author also means to point to the difficult situation concerning violence towards women, which is a largely discussed topic. In addition, as was previously mentioned, homelessness is a large topic when it comes to collective trauma, as violence, not solely towards women, might come with it due to the substance abuse and financial problems connected with homelessness. The society is thus feeling resentful and unsafe, which might contribute to the prejudices of the community, while on the other hand causing more trauma to those having to endure the loss of their homes.

To begin with focusing on the individual trauma, it is appropriate to introduce the two main characters, who are at the same time both narrators of the story, the married couple Nick and Amy. The story follows the days of Amy`s disappearance while also provides Amy`s diary for the readers to seemingly get more insights, however, Amy is actually a mentally unstable, traumatized character and therefore figures as the unreliable narrator. As Blahušková puts it, when unreliable narrators are used, “they either perceive the story in a distorted mirror, present it in a reader as if seen in a distorted mirror, or, most probably, both of the two.”²²⁸ What is more, there are various narrative strategies chosen by the narrators to manipulate the readers,

²²⁴ Rautinen, “I Tell a Gothic Tale of Possessiveness and Rage”, 29.

²²⁵ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 111.

²²⁶ Johansen, “The Neoliberal Gothic: `Gone Girl, Broken Harbor`, and the Terror of Everyday Life”, 39.

²²⁷ Johansen, “The Neoliberal Gothic: `Gone Girl, Broken Harbor`, and the Terror of Everyday Life”, 40.

²²⁸ Veronika Blahušková, *Nabokov`s Unreliable Narrators* (Brno: Masaryk University, 2011), 5.

such as for instance “sharing their private thoughts, exhibiting knowledge, carefully selecting information,”²²⁹ or in Amy’s case, even manufacturing information. “I catch him looking at me with those watchful eyes, the eyes of an insect, pure calculation, and I think: *This man might kill me.*”²³⁰ This quote is one of the entries in Amy’s diary, whereas in the following chapters, the antagonist describes precisely how she aims to frame Nick, stating that the diary itself is just fiction,²³¹ as the antagonist writes: “I hope you liked Diary Amy. She was meant to be likeable. Meant for someone like you to like her.”²³² The unreliable narrator thus twists the information for her own use, abusing the topic of domestic violence and traumatized women, through which Flynn points to the fact that women can be the villains and that men can also appear in the role of the victim. What is more, however, the author might also wish hint towards Amy’s fragmented identity, which has been shaped throughout her childhood by her fabricated image of Amazing Amy, character in the books written by her parents²³³.

However, Flynn again manages to tell the story of the antagonist in such a way that the readers still have space for understanding, due to the character’s childhood trauma. When Amy decides to let the readers in on her brilliant plan to frame Nick for her murder, the wife declares that she wishes the readers to meet her real self. Even though there are negative some opinions concerning the roots of Amy’s behaviour being in previous mental tenseness, where the author, Marso, specifically claims that “we are less likely to interpret the violence enacted by Amy in *Gone Girl* [...] as resulting from psychological distress, or a hunger for power,”²³⁴ however, there are still signs suggesting otherwise. “To start: I should have never been born.”²³⁵ The very first sentence of Amy’s revelation of self already points to the wife’s troubled mind. “My mother had five miscarriages and two stillbirths before me. [...] They tried and tried and finally came me. My mother didn’t count on my being alive, couldn’t bear to think of me as an actual baby, a living child, a girl who would get to come home.”²³⁶ Amy was therefore from the very beginning an attempt which turned out to have worked out, as the antagonist mentions later, she

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 231.

²³¹ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 245-252.

²³² Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 264.

²³³ Lori Marso, “Perverse protests: Simone de Beauvoir on Pleasure and Danger, Resistance, and Female Violence in Film” in *Signs* 41, no. 4, published 2016, 882. Accessed June 2, 2023.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26552857>

²³⁴ Marso, “Perverse protests: Simone de Beauvoir on Pleasure and Danger, Resistance, and Female Violence in Film”, 871.

²³⁵ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 246.

²³⁶ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 247.

“grew up feeling special, proud. I was the girl who battled oblivion and won. [...] I ruined my mother’s womb in the process- my own prenatal Sherman’s March. Marybeth would never have another baby. As a child, I got vibrant pleasure out of this: just me, just me, only me.”²³⁷ Amy was thus from the very beginning a greatly attention seeking person, she could not even bare her mother’s alone time on the days her unborn siblings died²³⁸, whom Amy perceived as “perfect without trying,”²³⁹ while she always had to try hard to be the perfect child.²⁴⁰

The previous representation of the parts of the novel do not invite much space for compassion, however, what further traumatized Amy was the fact her parents managed to make a kind of a project out of their child, managing to negatively shape her personality for the future, providing her with a kind of no-identity, which is visible throughout the novel where the antagonist creates her personalities based on her contemporary needs.²⁴¹ To support these claims, Marso also writes that “what we learn of Amy is revealed to be artifice layered upon artifice. [...] Amazing Amy, the wildly popular and profitable fictional image, grows and changes with the real Amy from birth to marriage. But while Amy is certainly amazing – [...] – she confides to Nick that she is never quite as amazing as the character in the books.”²⁴² Such claim is further supported by Amy’s perception of the book series and the character based on her person which were written by her parents throughout the years. “My parents have always worried that I’d take Amy too personally – they always tell me not to read too much into her. And yet I can’t fail to notice that whenever I screw something up, Amy does it right. When I finally quit violin at age twelve, Amy was revealed as a prodigy in the next book. [...] When I blew off the junior tennis championship at age sixteen to do a beach weekend with friends, Amy recommitted to the game. (Sheesh, I know it’s fun to spend time with friends, but I’d be letting myself and everyone else down if I didn’t show up for the tournament.)”²⁴³ The antagonist was thus from a very young age exposed to a kind of abuse from her parents, who also happened to be unable to be straightforward with their daughter. What is more, Amy is aware of all this later in life, saying: “I decided it was all too ridiculous to think about. That my parents, two child psychologists, chose this particular public form of passive-aggressiveness towards their child was not just

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 248.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 245-476.

²⁴² Marso, “Perverse protests: Simone de Beauvoir on Pleasure and Danger, Resistance, and Female Violence in Film”, 882.

²⁴³ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 38.

fucked up but also stupid and weird and kind of hilarious.”²⁴⁴ The book series as perceived by the wife are a great indicator of the actual impact it had on Amy and her mental well-being and perception of self. “Until Nick, I’d never really felt like a person, because I was always a product. Amazing Amy had to be brilliant, creative, kind, thoughtful, witty, and happy.”²⁴⁵ Such pressure may turn out as deeply traumatizing for the kid and it is possible to claim that such demands, even though, or may they are indirect, correspond with lack of support provided for the child, especially when the child feels they are being treated as some kind of an inanimate project, just like is the case with Amy.

What is more, there is the aspect of a little town as a source of trauma, similarly to the setting of Flynn’s other novel, *Sharp Objects*. The antagonist experiences intense negative feelings about her and her husband’s moving to the country, especially since Amy comes from the large city of New York. “I could hear the tale, how everyone would love telling it: how Amazing Amy, the girl who never did wrong, let herself be dragged, penniless, to the middle of the country.”²⁴⁶ The antagonistic wife thus not only refers to the image of Amazing Amy, who in a way sets an unrealistic example for her and her choices, Amy also links the persona together with the bad decision to move away from the city, which has not even been hers, and which can come as stressful, especially when forced upon. To focus on the author’s attempt to shape Amy based on her experienced trauma, it is possible to believe that the author wishes to again show how childhood trauma and trauma stemming in the family can alter the person’s identity, while trying to explain the way traumatic events possess the power to turn one into a villain, similarly to Amma in the novel *Sharp Objects*.

Additionally, the little town, North Carthage, becomes a source of trauma for Nick as well, due to the narrow-mindedness of the community and their attitudes full of prejudice, further influenced by Amy’s manipulation. The people of Nick’s hometown gradually turn away from Nick and start to believe the protagonist is in a way involved in Amy’s disappearance. Such persuasion is deducible from Nick’s encounter with Noelle Hawthorne, a woman convinced she is Amy’s friend. “You sure seem to be handling it all okay. I twitched my head at her, unsure what to say. Do you even know who I am?” she asked. “Of course. You’re Noelle Hawthorne.”

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 262.

‘I’m Amy’s *best* friend here.’”²⁴⁷ From the conversation, the readers are able to deduce sort of hostility towards Nick Dunne, suggesting Noelle is not convinced about his innocence in the case. Furthermore, when asked about additional information, Noelle says that “the police know where to find her,”²⁴⁸ further suggesting her unwillingness to cooperate with Nick. What is more, another character to compromise his credibility is Shawna, when invited for an interview by the media. When asked about Nick handling the situation, Shawna says that “he was very calm. Very friendly,”²⁴⁹ while further lying that “he was actually a little flirty...”²⁵⁰ Therefore, it is possible to say that Nick has little support in his hometown, apart from his sister, which can be greatly traumatizing, as the victim is blamed for a crime he did not commit, while also experiencing the feeling of not having any control over the things in his life or having his neighbours to stand by him. In addition, the protagonist is also met with the prejudice and stereotype that “it is always the husband”²⁵¹ who is behind any violence towards the wife, which, based on the knowledge that this is Nick’s own thought, the protagonist managed to internalize in himself as well. What is more, the husband also mentions that “a lot of people watch these news programs where the husband is always this awful guy who kills his wife, and they are seeing me through that lens, and some really innocent, normal things are being twisted. This is turning into a witch hunt.”²⁵² Through these events, Flynn brings up the topic of the possible abuse of the rooted belief that only women are traumatized by men. While, as was previously mentioned, women are more prone to experiencing various kinds of trauma than their male counterparts, in this case the author points out the dangers of stereotypical thinking and prejudice, which can be greatly traumatizing for the victim, be it more so when Nick’s life is threatened by being sentenced to death.²⁵³

To take a closer look at the husband, Nick. Apart from the already mentioned lack of support offered by his peers, the protagonist has suffered enough trauma already, including his dysfunctional marriage with Amy, his complicated relationship with his mentally disrupted father, the loss of his mother and his inability to fulfil the socially accepted male role as the breadwinner. What is more, all of these instances lead the protagonist to unhealthy attempts to find a way out, be it at least temporarily. With this all written, it is possible to claim that the

²⁴⁷ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 151.

²⁴⁸ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 152.

²⁴⁹ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 186.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 208.

²⁵³ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 425.

husband is trying to cope with all the trauma through his alcohol addiction and his being unfaithful to his wife.

Firstly, it is interesting to investigate the childhood experience of the protagonist Nick, which was plagued by an abusive father. “My father had infused my childhood with unspoken blame. He was the kind of man who skulked around looking for things to be angry at.”²⁵⁴ The protagonist thus had a childhood full of emotional abuse, which is where many symptoms of trauma can be rooted, as was previously mentioned. It is possible to claim that the author uses Nick’s tough childhood and the protagonist’s trauma as a tool to evoke sympathy, while also trying to explain the way the character behaves. The protagonist self-analyses himself, insisting that it influenced his personality. “It had turned me into a knee-jerk suckup to authority. [...] I craved a constant stream of approval.”²⁵⁵ What is more, the protagonist’s sister even said to Nick: “You’d literally lie, cheat, and steal – hell, kill – to convince people you are a good guy.”²⁵⁶ With this piece of a conversation, Flynn manages to again lessen Nick’s credibility, even to the readers, which helps the author to create suspense. What is more, one could believe that the experience from childhood altered Nick’s personality and his perception of self, and thus managed to in a way fragment his identity, shaped by external sources, such as opinions of others, however, it is also possible to witness a great amount of self-reflexivity, as described earlier in this paper, where the protagonist ruminates about the reasons for his behaviour and searching for its roots.

To continue, Nick suffered the loss of his beloved mother, while his abusive father lived on. Nick judges the events very negatively, claiming that “it absolutely infuriated me that my father lingered on while my mum was in the ground.”²⁵⁷ The protagonist is thus presented as greatly enraged by the injustice of life, where the person who inflicted him suffering lives instead of the other, caring parent. Such instance is an exhibition of the feelings of injustice victims of trauma often have to go through. In addition, Nick was from a very young age exposed to stereotypical, hateful comments aimed towards women, which is the source of his unwanted repetitive thoughts. Once the protagonist shares with the readers an instance when there was a woman running for vice-president on television. “My mother, my tiny, sweet mom, put her

²⁵⁴ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 56.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 44.

hand on the back of Go's head and said, *Well, I think it's wonderful*. And my dad flipped the TV off and said, *It's a joke. You know it's a goddamn joke. Like watching a monkey ride a bike.*"²⁵⁸ Additionally, the protagonist described his father as generally hateful of women. "He just didn't like women. He thought they were stupid, inconsequential, irritating. *That dumb bitch*. It was favorite phrase for any woman who annoyed him: a fellow motorist, a waitress, our grade school teachers, none of whom he ever actually met, parent-teacher conferences stinking of the female realm as they did."²⁵⁹ His father's attitude towards women witnessed by Nick made the protagonists adopt a kind of hidden behaviour, which the husband himself despised. "No matter how I try to be my mother's son, my dad's voice comes into my head unbidden, depositing awful thoughts, nasty words,"²⁶⁰ while the thoughts race when speaking to the female police officer: "*Stupid bitch*"²⁶¹ Such intrusive thoughts can be perceived as connected to traumatic experience, since, as was previously mentioned, repetition can be considered a symptom of trauma.

Moreover, the protagonist suffers from the traumatic experience surrounding the socially rooted gender roles, where he is currently unable to come about as the breadwinner of the family, while having to come to terms with the fact that he has lost his job as a writer. "Do not blame me for this particular grievance Amy. The Missouri Grievance. Blame the economy, blame bad luck, blame my parents, blame your parents, blame the Internet, blame people who use the Internet. I used to be a writer. I was a writer who wrote about TV and movies and books. Back when people read things on paper, back when anyone cared about what I thought."²⁶² From Nick's thoughts, it is possible for one to deduce that the character is filled with anger and blame towards the society, having to process the shock that his occupation is gradually becoming forgotten, just as he, as a writer, is. It is also visible that Nick has suffered a blow to his self-confidence, as one would realise from his feeling that nobody cares about his opinions, and thus feeling the loss of the support from his readers.

Supplementarily, the husband decided to establish a bar with his sister, Go, however, this circumstance is not taken particularly positively neither by his wife, Amy, nor by Nick himself, for several reasons, just as it does not provide Nick with relief of being the working man of the

²⁵⁸ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 73-74.

²⁵⁹ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 73.

²⁶⁰ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 72.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 13.

family. Firstly, Amy was the one to fund her husband`s bar, which does not provide Nick with the feeling of deserving credit for being a businessman. “My sister and I had done a foolish thing when we both moved back home. We had done what we always talked about doing. We opened a bar. We borrowed money from Amy to do this, eighty thousand dollars, which was once nothing to Amy but by then was almost everything. I swore I would pay her back, with interest. I would not be a man who borrowed from his wife – I could feel my dad twisting his lips at the very idea. *Well, there are all kinds of men*, his most damning phrase, the second half left unsaid, *and you are the wrong kind.*”²⁶³ One could therefore claim the protagonist is ashamed for having to rely on his wife, a woman, when it comes to financing his establishment, which can be connected to the societal perception of gender role, as well as his childhood trauma due to his father`s negative perception of women, as well as his abusive tendencies. What is more, Flynn has the ability to present how childhood trauma keeps resurfacing throughout one`s life, as well as the way social prejudice as well as pressure can be hurtful to the victim, both male or female, where Johansen also describes the antagonist, Amy, as refusing the “role Nick ultimately expects her to play: *femina domestica*,”²⁶⁴ meaning that the wife despises the socially established roles for women as those who stay home and take care of the household and family.

Along with Nick`s negative feelings surrounding the fact that he lost his job, the protagonist consequently turned to regular drinking, while knowing that in reality, alcohol is not the solution. When speaking to the police, Nick jokes that “sometimes the answer is at the bottom of a bottle,”²⁶⁵ while immediately claiming that he “wincing again at the inappropriateness.”²⁶⁶ Such reality points to the fact that the protagonist is aware of the fact that not only his bad habit is not a solid way of coping with trauma and additionally, Nick`s immediate reaction shows his decreased self-confidence as well as the previously mentioned need to be likeable. However, to return to the notion of alcohol abuse, for Nick, it is a way to escape the ugly reality. During the search for Amy, there are many instances where Nick is advised not to drink, however, the protagonist is unable to help himself. “I didn`t listen to Go about the booze. I finished half the bottle sitting on her sofa by myself, my eighteenth burst of adrenaline kicking in just when I thought I`d finally go to sleep. [...] I took repeated tugs on the bottle, psyching myself for sleep,

²⁶³ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 17.

²⁶⁴ Johansen, “The Neoliberal Gothic: `Gone Girl, Broken Harbor`, and the Terror of Everyday Life”, 45.

²⁶⁵ Johansen, “The Neoliberal Gothic: `Gone Girl, Broken Harbor`, and the Terror of Everyday Life”, 46.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

a losing routine.”²⁶⁷ The husband thus abuses alcohol for the reasons of calming himself down, just like the protagonist of *Sharp Objects*, Camille.

Also, it is thus possible to insist on the fact that the author, Flynn, refers to alcohol abuse as an unhealthy coping mechanism stemming from various traumatic experiences, both recent as well as rooted in childhood, and uses the instances of trauma to explain how alcoholism and trauma are linked together, without being judgemental towards the characters.

Lastly, the author also investigates the motif of a dysfunctional marriage and ways of coping with the anxious, even traumatic, experience stemming from such state of being, while also providing the childhood trauma of the married couple as a hint towards the inability of the characters to sustain healthy and stable relationships. As was previously written above, it is suggested that victims of childhood trauma, though surely the issue is not narrowed to this group, are often challenged in adulthood when it comes to forming relationships with others, be it a romantic relationship or friendship. Other authors, Rellini and their colleagues, stress the importance of childhood when it comes to one’s intimacy with others and carry out their research in reference to abuse. The authors choose to quote DeSilva and their co-workers, insisting that “the most commonly reported sexual and relationship problems for women with a history of childhood maltreatment include inhibited sexual desire, lower levels of sexual satisfaction, difficulties becoming sexually aroused or reaching orgasm, difficulties developing emotional intimacy with a partner, and interpersonal aggression.”²⁶⁸ Many of these issues mentioned are a large topic in *Gone Girl*, where, as was already stated before, the two main characters struggle to keep up and work out their marriage, which is obvious from the protagonist’s words. “I got secretly furious, spent ten minutes just winding myself up – because at this point of our marriage, I was so used to being angry with her, it felt almost enjoyable.”²⁶⁹ When it comes to anger, it is possible to analyse interpersonal aggression when it comes to the context of the central couple’s marriage, even though from Nick’s side, it stays seemingly hidden. What else Nick tries to hide, though unsuccessfully, is the protagonist affair with one of his students, which was mostly rooted in his need for appreciation. “Andie was there,

²⁶⁷ Johansen, “The Neoliberal Gothic: ‘Gone Girl, Broken Harbor’, and the Terror of Everyday Life”, 70.

²⁶⁸ Alessandra H. Rellini, Anka A. Vujanovic, Myani Gilbert, and Michael J. Zvolensky. “Childhood Maltreatment and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation: Associations with Sexual and Relationship Satisfaction among Young Adult Women” in *The Journal of Sex Research* 49, no. 5, published 2012, 434.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42002013>

²⁶⁹ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 125-126.

lingering after class, asking me questions about myself that Amy never had, not lately. Making me feel like a worthwhile man, not the idiot who lost his job, the dope who forgot to put the toilet seat down, the blunderer who just could never get it right, whatever it was.”²⁷⁰ The author thus depicts the husband as needy of admiration, which one could link to the lack of appreciation the protagonist received from his father, while also presenting the relationship between the two characters as abusive, therefore presenting Nick as being revictimized as well as imprisoned in a similar kind of depreciative relationship.

Another perception of the way Nick`s and Amy`s marriage has evolved throughout the years is revealed to the readers when Nick is questioned about their relationship by the police, to which his initial answer is that they “had bumps,”²⁷¹ while further sharing his personal thoughts with the readers: “I saw Amy in the bedroom that last night, her face mottled with the red hivey splotches she got when she was angry. She was spitting out the words – mean, wild words – and I was listening to her, trying to accept the words because they were true, they were technically true, everything she said.”²⁷² Such ruminations refers to the marriage as being filled with interpersonal aggression, even though it is verbal, additionally, it is to be perceived as following the childhood trauma of both the individuals, where the thoughts Nick is experiences further confirm the low self-esteem of the protagonist. One could thus claim that the author attempts to bring to the light how adult relationships suffer damage when the individuals are survivors of childhood maltreatment and how the individuals participating in the relationships are unable to retrieve a solution.

Conclusion

To summarize the ideas and arguments presented in this thesis, together with the analysis of the two novels by Gillian Flynn, it is possible to claim that the author uses multiple ways to depict both individual and collective traumata of the characters, stemming from various sources. Most importantly, it is necessary to point out extensive focus on childhood abuse, neglect or other maltreatment which shapes the identity of the characters and follows them into adulthood, making their experience of their ordinary lives difficult, helpless and even unbearable. Equally

²⁷⁰ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 169.

²⁷¹ Flynn, *Gone Girl: A Novel*, 203.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

important is the author`s preoccupation with sexual violence in the context of the contemporary society and the society of small towns, where the victims might encounter lack of support from their surroundings, while explaining the victim`s consequent inability to come to terms with the experience.

Additionally, one would suggest that the author describes the trauma as experienced by the characters, both protagonists and antagonists, in such a manner that the symptoms of various traumata are utilized to elaborate more specifically on the way a trauma victim behaves as well as the reasons for their possible behaviours, including risky, addictive, abusive behaviours, or for instance how the victim continues with forming relationships in adulthood. What Flynn manages to pass on to the readers are the emotions a trauma victims has to endure on daily basis and the shortcomings which come with the fact that their stressful, shocking experience continues to shape the characters identity even after a long time has passed, leaving the characters of the two novels broken, addicted to various dangerous coping mechanisms, including substance abuse, manipulation, control or for instance self-harm.

Concerning the novel *Sharp Objects*, the author explores various spheres of possible traumata, including childhood trauma, sexual abuse, collective trauma stemming from the local violence as well as the role a small-town mindedness plays in the victim`s experience of trauma. Flynn further chooses to picture the protagonist`s ongoing fight with previous traumatic experiences, depicting the character`s flashbacks, alcohol addiction, self-harm and difficulties concerning relationships, all of which are rooted in the character`s inability to come to terms with the terrible events she has encountered, including her foul relationship with her mother. Flynn manages to depict the damage trauma can inflict in such a way which awakens understanding and compassion in readers, without abusing the topic for selfish purposes such as adding drama to the novel or creating suspense.

Similarly to *Sharp Objects*, childhood trauma is of great importance in the novel *Gone Girl* as well, allowing the author to foreshadow the background of the characters and the reasons for their behaviour, which is rooted, though not solely, in hurtful relationships with their parents, turning the characters into people with low self-confidence unable to sustain healthy relationships. What is more, Flynn manages to show how a person`s pathological need for appreciation and acknowledgement can be rooted in childhood maltreatment, similarly to the search for utter perfection, which never allows a victim of trauma to feel content. Additionally,

Flynn again sets the story in a small town, depicting the local mentality as close-minded, collectively traumatized by past economic issues, which poses as another source of trauma for the protagonist, as well as for the antagonist, who was made to move there. The author thus finds a way to show the long-term, damaging aspects of lack of support through the idea of a small town as well as unsupportive family or a family member, again without abusing the topic of trauma and pain to create a dreadful atmosphere in the thriller, but rather to elaborate on the possible consequences for the trauma victims` behaviour and perception of self.

However, even though Flynn manages to stay true to the depiction of trauma without romanticizing the experience or using it for drama inducing purposes, the author does not offer any way out for the readers, not providing them with hope or positive outcome for the characters, who at the end remain stuck in their situations. In *Gone Girl*, Nick remains married to Amy, even after everything the antagonist put him through, simply because of the blackmail from her side, while in *Sharp Objects*, the novel ends with the murders being solved, without providing any other information on the mental state of the protagonist, who did, though, escape her deranged mother. It is thus possible to claim that Flynn uses trauma as a way of introducing terrible backgrounds of the characters, which serve mostly as a path to the characters minds, providing the readers with a way to realise their feelings towards the characters, as well as a possibility to identify with them, without, however, being offered a positive outlook, which allows Flynn to sustain the dark atmosphere of a psychological thriller.

Resumé

Tato práce se zabývá výskytem a účelem traumatu v práci Gillian Flynn, jmenovitě v románech *Sharp Objects* a *Gone Girl*, kde autorka reaguje na traumatickou minulost postav v kontextu dnešní americké společnosti a v kontextu moderní literatury, kde je v poslední době trauma často zkoumaným tématem díky novodobému zájmu o dobrý psychický stav člověka.

V první kapitole je představeno téma traumatu, kde je objasněn tento termín v kontextu lidské mysli, kde se dozvídáme, jaký vliv mají traumatické události na identitu a osobnost člověka a jeho chování. Dále je vysvětlena povaha událostí, které mohou být považovány za traumatické, a které mají výrazný, bolestivý a dlouhodobý vliv na člověka, a které mají moc ovlivnit naše každodenní fungování. Je zde například nastíněno trauma spojené se špatnou rodinnou dynamikou, vliv špatného zacházení s dítětem na jeho rozvoj, nebo například násilí na ženách či trauma spojené se zakořeněnými společenskými rolmi, které by pohlaví měly podle společnosti zastávat.

Poté je v této kapitole představeno rozdělení mezi individuálním a kolektivním traumatem, kde je nastíněna podstata obou témat, včetně možných příkladů. Kolektivní trauma je zde vysvětleno jako trauma, které spojuje jedince v dané skupině či společnosti, a je zakořeněné v dané, společně zažité katastrofě, ale také může být přenášeno generačně, tedy mohou být oběťmi i lidé, kteří danou událost nezažili přímo. Jsou zde zmíněny například světové války, holocaust, nebo například otroctví.

Druhá kapitola se zabývá přímo vzestupem zájmu o trauma a o jeho následky. V této kapitole se dozvídáme, že zájem autorů o trauma je spojen s výzkumem humanitních studií a jejich zaměřením na to “reálné” a “reprezentované”, tudíž je zde nastíněn výzkum toho, jakým způsobem si člověk trauma interpretuje. Kapitola je také zaměřena na šíření povědomí skrz masová media, díky kterým se povaha traumatu dostala do povědomí široké společnosti, a tudíž vzbudila zájem i proto, že se spousta lidí s různými traumatickými událostmi setkala. Každopádně je zde ale vyjádřena i trvající problematika týkající se pocitu bezpečí, které je nutné pro oběti aby své zážitky byly ochotné sdílet.

Třetí kapitola se věnuje traumatu v rámci americké společnosti. V této kapitole je nastíněn vzestup zájmu o trauma a celkově o psychický stav jedince, dále je zde rozebírán vliv života bez domova ve Spojených státech na jedince i na společnost, jak často a jak brzy jsou děti v této zemi vystaveny traumatickým událostem, či jakou pozici mají v této problematice ženy, a jaké následky traumatu je ve Spojených státech možné zpozorovat, jako například zneužívání návykových látek, nebo sebepožkozování.

Následně je v práci zmíněno trauma, jeho výskyt a role přímo v rurálních oblastech. V této kapitole je zkoumána problematika zneužívání návykových látek, násilí či například

problematika rasismu a dozvídáme se, že děti v malých městech mají větší šanci zažít násilné chování, nebo například být jeho svědky. Dále je zmíněn špatný přístup k dobrým zdravotnickým službám, nebo například nucený přesun do malých měst, které mají opět na člověka do budoucna negativní vliv.

Čtvrtá kapitola se zabývá přímo traumatem v kontextu literatury a poskytuje obecný vhled do teorie traumatu v rámci literární teorie. V této kapitole je vyjádřena motivace autorů k zakomponování traumatu do jejich díla, jako je například možnost zkoumat traumatizované postavy jako kdyby se jednalo o živé bytosti, nebo například využití traumatu k nastolení dramatické, hrůzné atmosféry. Druhý příklad je však často odsuzován, jelikož může mít za následek další trauma pro čtenáře, které si danými událostmi prošli. Dále jsou zde nastíněny možné scénáře, které mohou být v literatuře využity, často se poté jedná o trauma z děství, nebo násilí na ženách.

V následující kapitole se zaměříme specifičtěji na znázornění traumatu v psychologickém thrilleru, včetně stručného vysvětlení povahy tohoto žánru. Psychologický thriller je zde nastíněn jako žánr, ve kterém jde převážně o nastolení napětí a děsivé atmosféry, často založeným na problematické mysli člověka. Častými ústředními tématy jsou tudíž psychicky narušení jedinci, nebezpeční pro společnost, děti a své bezprostřední okolí, jejichž motivy a pohnutky je nemožné pochopit. Často se ale jedná i o mentálně narušené protagonisty, kteří zároveň vystupují jako pozitivní postavy a vzbuzují ve čtenářích sympatie.

Analytická část se již zabývá výhradně výskytem a účelem traumatu v daných zkoumaných pracích od autarky Gillian Flynn. První z nich je román nazvaný *Sharp Objects*, zabývající se nejen individuálním, ale také kolektivním traumatem. Hlavní hrdinka románu Camille si s sebou nese velmi intenzivní bolestné zážitky z dětství a adolescence, kdy její život sužoval nejen chladný vztah s matkou, ale také smrt její sestry a sexuální napadení hrdinky skupinou chlapců ze školy. V průběhu děje se dozvídáme více o násilné minulosti města, do kterého se Camille vrací. Gillian Flynn zde vyobrazuje traumatické události, které mohou potkat velkou část lidí, a ukazuje, jakým způsobem jsou schopny člověka ovlivnit v rámci utváření vztahů nejen s ostatními, ale i se sebou samými. Prostřednictvím hlavní hrdinky vyobrazuje propojenost traumatických událostí a respektem k sobě samé, a vyobrazuje snahu Camille srovnat se se svou minulostí prostřednictvím sebepoškozování a závislosti na alkoholu. V románu je možné

pozorovat snahu o vzbuzení zájmu o psychickou stránku člověka a o pochopení, avšak román na konci nenabízí z tohoto hlediska rozuzlení, a tudíž si zachovává svou temnou stránku.

Nakonec se zaměříme na poslední zkoumaný román, *Gone Girl*, od stejné autorky. V tomto díle autorka opět reaguje na problematiku společnosti týkající se traumatu z dětství, nyní u obou postav, jak hlavního hrdiny, tak záporné hrdinky. U obou postav je možné pozorovat vliv, jaký trauma má na rozvoj identity jedince, a jakým způsobem ovlivňuje jejich chování a schopnost fungovat ve vztazích. Dále zde autorka reaguje na problematickou finanční situaci města, která má za následek nezaměstnanost a ztrátu domovů u některých obyvatel, což má dalek vliv na místní komunitu a jejich pocit bezpečí. Zároveň je zde ale vyobrazena také předpojatost obyvatel vůči lidem bez domova a jejich otevřenost manipulaci ze strany záporné hrdinky Amy. Na konci autorka opět nenabízí cestu ven z traumatizující situace a vzbuzuje tedy ve čtenářích pocit úzkosti, strachu a beznaděje.

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