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*Fractured selves and haunted pasts: Reading Trauma through Caruth and Felman in Susan Sontag's *Debriefing* (1978), Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), and Annie Proulx's *Postcards* (1992).*

**Presented by:**

- **Souad MELIANI**
- **Massiva MERDJOK**

**Supervised by: Dr. Arezki KHELIFA**

**Board examiners:**

- ❖ **Chair: Mr. BENMCHICHE Hacène, MCA, UMMTO.**
- ❖ **Supervisor: Mr. KHELIFA Arezki, MCA, UMMTO.**
- ❖ **Examiner: Mme. Bensidhoum Fatima, UMMTO.**

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## Dedication

*To those whose support carried me through every page of this journey, my dear **FAMILY**, may this humble work be a reflection of your prayers and the fruit of your sacrifices, though I know I can never fully repay you. I will always strive to make you even prouder. To my uncle **Rachid** and my aunt **Ouardia**, whose love has gently replaced every missing piece in my life.*

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*In memory of my beloved **father** and my dear **grandmother**, may God bless their souls, who were, and will forever remain, in my heart. . .*

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation is entitled *Fractured Selves and Haunted Pasts: Reading Trauma through Caruth and Felman in Debriefing (1978), A Lie of the Mind (1985), and Postcards (1992)*. It explores how trauma is portrayed in the narratives mentioned in the title, through Shoshana Felman's and Cathy Caruth's theoretical frameworks. It examines how trauma affects both individuals and the people around them, showing how the pain of a person can spread through his or her family, community, and society, and how it disturbs time, memory, and the ability to speak. All three works show trauma as something that is difficult to describe, usually silenced. The analysis demonstrates that characters are frequently muted by the boundaries of language and social expectations, and stay locked between survival and destruction. *A Lie of the Mind* examines familial breakdown, *Postcards* examines generational guilt and silence, and *Debriefing* examines narrative disintegration. Each chapter focuses on a distinct way that trauma manifests itself. This study concludes that literature aims to present trauma rather than to resolve it, to testify to the unspeakable and to highlight the moral obligation of listening.

**Key words:** Trauma, witnessing, testimony, narrative fragmentation, private and collective trauma, the unspeakable, fractured selves, haunted pasts.

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## I. General Introduction

This dissertation applies Trauma Theory to three American works: *A Lie of the Mind* by Sam Shepard, *Postcards* by Annie Proulx, and *Debriefing* by Susan Sontag. Characters in these writings suffer from loss, violence, and an inability to communicate or comprehend what happened to them. This study uses close examination to explore how trauma impacts memory, reshapes identity, and blurs the lines between personal suffering and historical collectives, and where healing is absent.

One of the earliest theorists to link trauma to neurosis and repression was Sigmund Freud, who maintained that trauma involves a delayed memory recall of a traumatic event <sup>1</sup>. Modern trauma studies first emerged in the 1990s, particularly through academic literary works most notably by Cathy Caruth, who developed the model of traditional trauma, in which trauma is noted as an incident that leads to the disruption of people's minds and resists explanation, it can only be realized later by indirect methods like storytelling, repetition, flashbacks or dreams <sup>2</sup>, and then Shoshana Felman expanded this field by connecting trauma to testimony, especially when it comes to Holocaust survivors. She maintained that literature can serve as a way for the representation and transmission of trauma between the speaker and the reader or listener <sup>3</sup>. Scholars are now able to investigate how trauma functions in literary, historical, and cultural contexts due to the transition from psychology to narrative analysis. Both Caruth and Felman have fundamentally changed our understanding of trauma, despite the difference between their works. They have accomplished this by maintaining the significance of discovering original approaches to recognize the significance of things that can only be understood belatedly and paying attention to the strength of encounters that can only be communicated indirectly.

## 1. Review of literature

*A Lie of The Mind*, *Postcards* and *Debriefing* have been the focus of many critics' attention, criticism is presented from a variety of perspectives. Starting with the play *A Lie of The Mind* is criticized by Carol Rosen who authored the article titled "*Sam Shepard, Feminist Playwright: The Destination of A Lie of the Mind*", which was published in 1987 in the journal *Modern Drama*. In this article, Rosen applies Feminist Literary Theory, challenging the idea that Shepard is a dramatist who is primarily focused on men as macho. Her goal is to examine how the play illustrates a change in Shepard's dramaturgy toward a critique of patriarchal systems and a greater empathy for female characters. In her analysis, Rosen contends that *A Lie of the Mind* is a destination in Shepard's work where female subjectivity and resistance become central to that the play exposes the traditional gender roles by revealing the psychological violence done on women by male hegemony and familial disintegration. She places Shepard's work in the context of a larger American theatrical feminist dialogue by following the female characters' trajectory towards victimization to a kind of self-awareness and agency, specifically for Beth and Meg <sup>4</sup>.

Another article entitled "*The Journey from Compliancy to Intimate Revolt: A Kristevan Reading of Sam Shepard's Three Major Plays*", co-authored by Forough Emam and Shideh Ahmadzadeh, it was published in 2016, in the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*. The authors address three of Sam Shepard's most important plays: *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind*, based on Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic and semiotic theory, based mostly on her models of the semiotic chora. The writers examine how female characters transition from emotional repression and social obligations to moments of psychological defense or "intimate revolt". The objective of the study is to show how Shepard's female characters navigate identity within limiting domestic spaces and patriarchal relationships. Emam and Ahmadzadeh claim, using the Kristevan lens, that these women experience deep psychological troubles that shatter gender norms and expose the collapse of symbolic order in

Shepard's dramatic universe. Their study concludes that Shepard's plays show the breakdown of families as well as the birth of female subjectivity through linguistic fragmentation and psychological crisis<sup>5</sup>.

Ann Christine Hall is the author of the doctoral dissertation titled "*A Kind of Alaska: The Representation of Women in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill, Harold Pinter, and Sam Shepard*", which was completed in 1986 at the University of Minnesota. Hall discusses how all three playwrights portray women in patriarchal domestic contexts using Feminist Literary Theory and Psychoanalytic theories with a focus on issues like female agency, gender roles, repression, and resistance. She discusses how O'Neill, Pinter, and Shepard portray women's struggles for independence and selfhood over a variety of eras and genres. Her work analyzes how O'Neill, Pinter, and Shepard portray women's struggles for independence and identity throughout several eras and genres. Although all authors are the limitations imposed on women by patriarchal society, Hall argues that Shepard's play is an indicator of a direction toward a more complicated and uncomfortable portrayal of female subjectivity, most prominently in such plays as *A Lie of the Mind*. Her writing ultimately illuminates the changing portrait of women in American and British drama during the 20th century by demonstrating how drama can reinforce as well as critique traditional gender constructions<sup>6</sup>.

Also, Li Jie and Xiong Shanshan are the authors of the article titled "*Dysfunctional Family in A Lie of the Mind*", published in 2016 in the journal *Cross-Cultural Communication*, which analyzes the disintegration of personal identities and familial bonds in Sam Shepard's 1985 play from the perspectives of Psychoanalytic Theory and family systems theory. Their study aims to examine how the dysfunction between the two main families, the Montana Langons and the Californian Moreys, is worsened by trauma, misunderstandings, power struggles, and emotional detachment. Li and Xiong demonstrate how patriarchal domination, psychological breakdown, and cultural disillusionment cause traditional family structures to fall apart by concentrating on characters like Jake, Beth, Meg, and Baylor. The collapse of American national and familial myths is reflected in *A Lie of the Mind*, according to their research, which presents the family

as a place of disorder where identity is continuously disputed and reinterpreted rather than as a source of stability<sup>7</sup>.

Moving to *Postcards*, the novel is criticized by Anna Martikainen, who has written the article "*Postcards from the Edge: The Journey Motif in Annie Proulx's Postcards*", was published on December 31, 2012, in VAKKI Publications Vol.1 No.1(2012): Language in Motion (Journal.fi). In this article, Martikainen uses the literary Scholar Janis Stout's concepts of escape, exploration, home-founding . This paper demonstrates how the individualities of the characters are linked to the terrain by analyzing numerous manifestations of the journey motif. The research of Martikainen reveals that Proulx uses the journey motif to demonstrate the intersection between time and location and the difficult relationship between a person and a terrain. Martikainen argues that Loyal has only one choice is to run away, although no one knows about his crime, and avoiding his past. She suggests that although Loyal leaves, he is still part of the land, which blocks him from making a life. She emphasizes that Loyal has only one way to contact his family is through postcards. Many critics portrayed the novel as a dark novel and several characters died in darkness<sup>8</sup>.

In another article titled "*Wish I Was There. Economies of Communication in Annie Proulx's Postcards*", by Kym Brindle, was published in 2018, in *The Epistolary Renaissance*. This paper examines the concepts of place, landscape, travelling, and longing for home in postcards's image that represent geographic distance and emotional separation and analyzes how Annie Proulx uses narrative potentials of the image postcard in *Postcards*. In addition, the writing represents the unavoidable pull of home and the wish to integrate, Proulx uses a fundamental contradiction while generally eliminating any reality of experience. This essay examines the form's selfreflective capacity, which is more important in the book, and explores it extensively. Brindle explores the function of postcards in travel, she uses Burford to explain that in the novel there are 'the silences, the elisions, the omissions; that seem to speak most' (Burford 1983: 5). She also uses Siegert (1999: 154): "in principle, the postcard was therefore nothing but a stamp that could be written on; it reduced the materiality of communication to its bare economy.";

means that the postcards are minimal for the content. For Proulx, the postcards were a narrative strategy that allowed her to “enlist the aid of the reader in filling in the blanks”. Brindle argues that each chapter has a postcard, focusing on distance, and journey in the novel. In cultural writing, postcards hold a unique position, bridging digital communication and letter writing. She argues that postcards can have meaning beyond the text, understood through their images and locations, but sometimes they are incomplete themes of written communication<sup>9</sup>.

Finally, the short story *Debriefing* is reviewed in the Kirkus Reviews article titled "*Debriefing*", published on November 14, 2017. The review provides a critical evaluation of her collection of short stories, through an analysis of how Susan Sontag's fictional writing significantly links real situations like sickness, death, and travel. The article uses a loosely psychoanalytic, even Lacanian, perspective, by presenting the concept of a "debriefing" as an emotional release or "data dump", a type of catharsis that resembles therapeutic unburdening. The review's main goal is to assess how, but briefly, Sontag's fiction captures the passion of her personal and intellectual life. The study concludes that although her fiction sometimes appears a little flat, it is however written in elegant, straightforward language and is heavily influenced by modernist writers. In the end, it presents Sontag's stories, including *Debriefing*, as complex and analytic examinations of trauma, giving readers a view into her multifaceted emotional and intellectual landscape<sup>10</sup>.

Daniel Lefferts critically examined Susan Sontag's *Debriefing* and compared it with her other works in his article "*Pessimism of the Intellect*", which was published in *Guernica* on November 6, 2017. Using a framework of Critical Theory and intellectual realism, Lefferts analyzes the conflict between "optimism of the will" and "pessimism of the intellect" to assess Sontag's fiction. The article's goal is to discuss whether her literary works, which are often shadowed by her essays, merit more careful critical examination. Lefferts adds that even if Sontag's stories sometimes approach being very academic and hard to understand, they still offer insightful, thought-provoking, and wise moments<sup>11</sup>.

Lastly, in his article "*Debriefing*", published on 4Columns.org on 27 October 2017, Brian

Dillon offers a structural and literary critique of Susan Sontag's short stories, focusing specifically on the imbrication of essay and narrative. He speaks about how Sontag's fiction assumes the traits of her essayistic voice, and her stories become a vehicle for critical analysis as opposed to mere storytelling. The article's objective is to reevaluate Sontag's fiction strengths and limitations, especially when her tales read more as essays, rather than traditional fiction. Dillon believes this similarity to essay structure need not be a limitation, but a smart and creative choice. He praises stories like *Debriefing* for their contemplative, questioning mode, something he thinks is the core of Sontag's writing originality <sup>12</sup>.

The above scholarly critics have studied the three narratives from different perspectives. They have discussed different issues and topics within the three works. However, one may indicate that some of the reviews have largely focused on a general understanding of the narratives, yet to our knowledge, the subject we intend to study has not been dealt with. Therefore, in this research, we are going to study the three narratives through the lens of Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth theories on trauma.

## **2. Issue and working hypothesis**

One can notice that many studies have already dealt with these narratives. However, little attention has been given to the analysis of the theme of trauma, particularly through the theoretical frameworks of Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, whose insights on testimony, memory, and belated understanding, are mostly missing from studies about these novels. The issue this dissertation addresses is how literature represents trauma not just as content, but as a structural and ethical problem of telling, witnessing, and remembering.

We intend study the three narratives *A Lie of the Mind*, *Postcards*, and *Debriefing* from the Shoshana Felman lens, where we will explore the interplay between private and collective trauma which means how one person's pain doesn't stay private instead it reverberates and

affects others too; also we are going to examine how trauma reshapes a new understanding of historical causality, and that trauma makes people see history differently, not just as facts but as painful experiences; then we will explore if there is any healing within the characters through what Felman suggested as testimony. Next, we'll examine these pieces through Cathy Caruth's perspective, relying on the idea that trauma is not fully understood at the time it happens but resurfaces later in unexpected ways, such as flashbacks, or dreams. We will analyze the effects of this recurring haunting on identity, memory, and the possibility (or impossibility) of healing in each of the three books.

The dissertation has shown, using Felman's and Caruth's studies, that trauma in literature is not just a personal crisis but also a historical and collective wound, challenging traditional notions of meaning, healing, and storytelling.

### 3. Methodological Outline

At the methodological level, the dissertation will follow the IMRAD method. We will start with an Introduction in which we will give a general background about the topic, and the purpose of our study. Then the Review of the Literature, in which we reviewed some of the literature about the three narratives we have chosen including: *A Lie of The Mind*, *Postcards* and *Debriefing*.

In the Methods and Materials section, we will introduce and explain the theory of Trauma by Shoshana Felman, and theory of Trauma by Cathy Caruth, following with short biographies of the two theorists, this is for the methods section . Then we will provide summaries of the novels cited above with the authors's short biographies, in the material section. After that we will deal with the Results section in which we will present our findings.

The Discussion Section consists of three chapters. In the first Chapter we will apply the two theories of Felman's and Caruth's on the play on *A Lie of The Mind*. In the second chapter we will apply the two theories of Felman's and Caruth's on the novel *Postcards*. And lastly, in the third chapter we will apply the two theories of Felman's and Caruth's on *Debriefing*. Finally, we will conclude with a summary of the important points and affinities related to the two works.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the pleasure principle". New York, 1920.

<sup>2</sup>Mambrol, Nasrullah. "Trauma studies. Literary theory and criticism." *Literariness*, www. literariness.org/2018/12/19/trauma-studies, 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Felman Shoshana, Dori Laub. "Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history". Taylor and Francis, 1992

<sup>4</sup>Rosen Carol. "Sam Shepard, Feminist Playwright: The Destination of a Lie of the Mind". *Contemporary Theatre Review* 8 (4): 29–40. 1998, doi:10.1080/10486809808568529.

<sup>5</sup>Emam Forough, Shideh Ahmadzadeh. "The Journey from Compliancy to Intimate Revolt: A Kristevan Reading of Sam Shepard's Three Major Plays." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 8, no.5 : 164-171. 2017, <https://doi.org/10.7575/AIAC.ALLS.V.8N.5P.164>.

<sup>6</sup>Hall Ann Christine. "A Kind of Alaska: The representation of women in the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Harold Pinter, and Sam Shepard". The Ohio State University, 1988.

<sup>7</sup>LI Jing, Shanshan XIONG. "Dysfunctional Family in A Lie of the Mind." *Cross-Cultural Communication* 12, no.7: 24-27. 2016, [https //DOI:10.3968/8555](https://DOI:10.3968/8555).

<sup>8</sup>Martikainen Anna. "Postcards from the edge: The journey motif in Annie Proulx's Postcards." *VAKKI Publications* 1, no.1: 175-186, 2012.

<sup>9</sup>Brindle Kym. "Wish I Was There." *The Epistolary Renaissance*: 107, 2018.

<sup>10</sup>Kirkus Reviews. "Debriefing", 2017, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/susan-sontag/debriefing/>.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Lefferts, "Pessimism of the Intellect." *Review Lit World*, 2017, <https://www.guernicamag.com/pessimism-of-the-intellect/>.

<sup>12</sup>Brian Dillon, "Debriefing." 2017, <https://4columns.org/dillon-brian/debriefing>.

## II. Methods and Materials

### 1. Methods

#### a) Biographies of the Theorists

- **Shoshana Felman (1942):** is an internationally known American literary theorist and Holocaust studies, trauma theory, and psychoanalysis scholar. Her attempts to bring French theory, most notably Lacan and Derrida into American literary theory were instrumental in gaining widespread recognition. Her most well-known works, including *"Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History"* (which she co-authored with Dori Laub), span an inquiry into how trauma disrupts language as well as traditionally conceived representations. Felman argues that hearing trauma, a trauma like the Holocaust, specifically requires new possibilities of hearing and reading. Drawing on literature, psychoanalysis, and law, her work reshaped the terms by which scholars think through memory, ethics, and history's responsibility. Her writing, though more theoretical than autobiographical, exhibits a searing wrestling with the emotional and ethical weight of trauma, especially collective trauma.

- **Cathy Caruth (1955):** is a key figure in literary theory and a theorist in the field of trauma studies. She is a professor, and teaches at Cornell University. She has written many works including: *"Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History"*, which helps to understand her ideas on trauma theory. *"Trauma: exploration in memory"*, *"Literature in the Ashes of history"*. In 2011, Cathy Caruth was honored with the Mellon visiting fellow at the Center for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, at Cambridge University. The role of Northrop Frye Chair in Literary Theory, is owned by Caruth, at the University of Toronto. The word "trauma theory" was founded by Cathy Caruth. She identifies Trauma in multiple literary works such books and films. Her works offer new opportunities to understand the painful events in human life.

## b) Shoshana Felman's Theory on Trauma

Shoshana Felman's contributions to trauma studies are significant and multifaceted, which is seen in her various works where she made her print in the field of trauma and psychoanalysis. Trauma, according to Shoshana Felman, is an event that resists direct representation and overwhelms the subject's capacity to process it in real time, it must be relieved through testimony, often in fragmented, indirect forms. According to her, trauma is social, collective, and personal, and it must be understood by a witness or listener<sup>1</sup>. In her work *'The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century (2002)'*, Felman delves into the complex relationship between trauma and legal trails, mentioning that the twentieth century was marked by both traumas and theories of trauma. She explores the interplay between private and collective traumas and argues that trauma doesn't stick on 'Private' or 'collective', Felman explored how public trials come to blur lines between personal trauma and collective history. Her core argument is that trauma cannot remain neatly compartmentalized. It leaks. What may begin as a private injury (e.g., abuse, murder) can trigger more general collective fault lines (e.g., racial injustice, national guilt). Similarly, collective atrocities such as the Holocaust are repeated in the stories of single sorrow<sup>2</sup>. She point into The Eichmann trial, the prosecution of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, where he was charged for his role in executing the Holocaust, an event that was designed initially to address the collective trauma of the Holocaust, however deep and personal traumas came to the surface as the survivors of it decided to reveal their individual suffering and blocked traumas<sup>3</sup>. She also discussed the Simpson trial started as O.J. Simpson has murdered his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend Ronald Goldman in 1994<sup>4</sup>, which is a case set out to address a private and domestic trauma (murder, domestic abuse), turned to be a matter of public concern and transformed into racial trauma and gender inequality<sup>5</sup>. In essence, Shoshana claims that trauma is never isolated; rather, it is a reflection of broader social patterns.

Furthermore, in her collaborative work with Dori Laub, *"Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in*

*Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*". She discusses that trauma is not just a psychological illness, but in addition it shapes a new understanding of historical causality by highlighting the fact that trauma still affects the present and is not just a thing of the past. Simply trauma challenges the linear cause-effect model and forces us to reconsider how history is made, felt, and understood by demonstrating that historical events, particularly violent or catastrophic ones, can have delayed, unconscious, and non-linear effects. Traumatic events frequently do not fully process at the time of occurrence, but instead reappear later through memory, symptoms, or testimony. Felman claims that historical traumas interrogate established narratives and require a reconsideration of our historical causality theories<sup>6</sup>. According to them, the effects of traumatic experiences are still present and not fully healed, they maintain that testimony can help with this. According to Felman's view, listening to stories offers insights into the ongoing outcomes of trauma and leads to a deeper, more complicated knowledge of history. This suggests that in order to fully understand historical causality, we need to take into account the narratives that emerge from those who lived events as well as the lasting effects of trauma<sup>7</sup>.

Testifying is more than just reporting what happened, it is a valiant act of survival, therefore it does not restore coherence to history, but creates a new way of meaning-making. The journey from trauma to survival is a resilient switch rather than a return to wholeness. Felman underscores the importance of Testimony, especially in the context of the Holocaust she cites Claude Lanzmann's documentary/movie Shoah, a compilation of testimonies from survivors that paints a picture of how the Nazi genocidal apparatus implemented the "Final Solution"<sup>8</sup>, as one of the well-known examples to demonstrate this. Felman investigates how Holocaust survivors use Shoah as a platform to testify about their experiences. She contends that testifying in the movie is a crucial procedure that empowers survivors to express their existence and regain their voices in the aftermath of cruelties, rather than just retelling past events. This act of testifying turns into a life-changing event that helps people transition from the trauma-imposed silence to a type of narrative and speech-based survival<sup>9</sup>. Felman emphasizes that testimony, as exemplified in Shoah, is not just a personal healing but an ethical act that links the gap between

the unspeakable horrors of the past and the necessity of remembrance and understanding in the present. Through the survivors' narratives, this shows the resilience and the enduring importance of giving voice to those who have endured profound suffering<sup>10</sup>. However, Felman contends that trauma sometimes shatters language, resulting in fragmented testimony, so testifying it is not always working as a solution to decrease someone's degree of trauma and it's called failure of testimony<sup>11</sup>.

### c) **Cathy Caruth's Theory on Trauma**

Trauma theory has developed as an essential framework for comprehending the difficult consequences of experiencing psychological trauma. It studies a person's reactions to painful events and the core of trauma. Moreover, according to trauma theory, when individuals experience painful traumatic events, it results in psychological trauma, and causes negative feelings<sup>12</sup>.

Most academics concur that Cathy Caruth's pioneering works are primarily responsible for the rise of trauma studies, and being carried out in literary studies. To have a more profound comprehension of trauma theory, it is necessary to read this work. The notion of trauma's unrepresentability, according to Cathy Caruth, trauma entirely defies linguistic expression, which signifies that a person consistently remembers that awareness yet rarely recognizes it. A painful event surpasses conventional communication. It means that trauma can not be expressed in words. This is Caruth's refined argument and the central concept of her theoretical framework<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, Cathy Caruth builds on Freud's idea on trauma in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996)<sup>14</sup>, she says:

'trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. . . It is always the story of wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available'<sup>15</sup>

This demonstrates that trauma affects the mind, not the body and it is hard to explain it directly<sup>16</sup>. Caruth uses Paul De Man's idea on language to highlight how it "does more than it knows" and how a traumatic event can act as "a deathlike break", signifying that language fails to explain

this painful event clearly and can be only felt<sup>17 18</sup>. Trauma is seen as an experience that shatters awareness and blocks explicit depiction, as introduced by Caruth, in the classical trauma model, it is hard for an individual to recount their traumatic experience, it resists representation<sup>19</sup>.

Moreover, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory focuses on the intersection of knowing and not knowing. According to her, trauma is a phenomena by nature because it is difficult to fully assimilate at the time of occurrence, making it an 'unclaimed experience'<sup>20</sup>. Dreams, flashbacks, and fragmented recollections are intrusive repeats that reflect the fundamental belatedness and unknowability of trauma, which is not immediately recognized or understood<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, she contends that trauma is marked by inherent latency, drawing on Freud's idea of belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*), in which the event isn't completely experienced at the time of occurrence but reappears later through intrusive repeats like flashbacks and dreams<sup>22 23</sup>. According to Caruth, the impact of trauma is due to its belatedness; victims suffer because they were not totally present at the time of the occurrence, which results in an absence at its heart<sup>24</sup>. Survivors may see this absence as "ghosts," controlled by their unresolved history<sup>25</sup>. In her book *Unclaimed Experience*(1996), Caruth argues that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature the way it was precisely not known in the first instance returns to haunt the survivor later on"<sup>26</sup>. This shows that although a person forgets his past, but in a way or another, the memory will return in his mind. In addition to that, in her study, Caruth writes a general definition of trauma, which she describes as 'The response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena'<sup>27</sup>. This illustrates the idea that trauma returns later in unexpected ways. It creates two fundamental paradoxes: first, that direct witnessing of violence often manifests as an inability to comprehend it, making immediacy appear as belatedness<sup>28</sup>; second, that trauma's full meaning only emerges in relation to another time and place, disrupting linear temporality<sup>29</sup>. In her analysis, Caruth explains that what comes back to haunt survivors from trauma's stories "is not only the reality of the event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not

yet been fully known”<sup>30</sup>. The example of the train accident was analyzed in Sigmund Freud’s *"Beyond the Pleasure Principle(1920)"*, and Cathy Caruth discussed it in her work, she used the example of the train accident to demonstrate that trauma returns later in unexpected ways<sup>31</sup>. In her work *Trauma: Explorations in Memory (1995)*, Caruth states, ‘the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experienced it’<sup>32</sup>. According to Cathy Caruth trauma ‘the way it was precisely not known in the first instance, returns to haunt the survivor later on’<sup>33</sup>. Caruth argues that: ‘to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event’<sup>34</sup>. This means that survivor’s trauma returns later often by flashbacks or dreams, because it is not fully understood when it occurs. The traumatic event often returns in dreams as Caruth uses Sigmund Freud’s idea about dreams ‘The returning traumatic dream startles Freud because it cannot be understood in terms of any wish or unconscious meaning, but is, purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits’<sup>35</sup>.

For Caruth, in order to heal, one must testify, which permits a slow rewriting of the past. In her work, she uses an example which is the film *Hiroshima mon amour (1959)*, a French film about two characters, a French woman and a Japanese man who fall in love in Hiroshima.; she argues that ‘their ability to speak and to listen in their passionate encounter does not rely, that is, on what they simply know of one another, but on what they do not fully know in their own traumatic pasts’<sup>36</sup>. Her idea is that, when these two people meet they can share their traumatic past, not only about their emotions.

## **2. Materials**

### **a) Biographies of the authors**

- **Sam Shepard (1943-2017):** was an American playwright, actor, and screenwriter, whose work gave a raw vision of shattered families, men, and their myth of the American West. He broke into the 1960s avant-garde theatre world and was Pulitzer prize winner of *Buried Child*

(1979). His greatest plays: *"True West"*, *"Fool for Love"*, and *"A Lie of the Mind"*, are highly traumatic, and are heavily concerned with the issues of emotional suppression and family hell, all major themes in his own experience. Shepard was raised by an alcoholic emotionally cold father whose impact left indelible psychological scars. His work was influenced by troubled male characters, often violent characters who were inhabitants of his personal history. In addition to theater, Shepard made a significant career in films, with an Oscar nominated role in *The Right Stuff*. He died from ALS in 2017, with a chilling, emotionally charged American drama legacy.

- **Annie Proulx (1935):** is a novelist, fiction writer, historian and essayist. She was born in Norwich, Connecticut. In 1973, Proulx obtained her master's degree of arts in history, from Sir George Williams(now Concordia University) in Montreal. She has written many novels including: *"Postcards"*, *"The Shipping News"*, *"Accordion Crimes"*. In 1993, her first novel "Postcards", was a success, she received the PEN Faulkner award for fiction. In its twelve-year history, she was the first female to hold an Award. In 1994, her most famous work won the Chicago Tribune's Heartland Award for fiction. She also writes short stories such as: *"The Wyoming Trilogy"*, and *"Brokeback Mountain from Close Range: Wyoming Stories"*. Her novels focus on rural life in specific areas of the United States. Proulx's novels explore how poor people endure social, economic, and geological upheaval. She uses her historian background to write her novels, and she often travels to places where she writes about and this helps her to succeed in the expressions, time and regional customs. Annie Proulx experienced three failed marriages, she has written about the issues of relationships in her works. In an interview with the Guardian, she stated, "I think relationships are the hardest thing in the world. They're the most rewarding, but they're also the most difficult." She said in an interview with the Paris Review, that she is far from the jolly family circle, and a lovely husband is not for her. She learned to live alone, like many other women.

- **Susan Sontag (1933–2004):** was an American writer and cultural critic whose bold critiques of art, media, and politics established her as a leading intellectual voice. She made her mark with her 1964 essay Notes on "Camp" and went on to write widely acclaimed books such

as *On Photography and Against Interpretation*. Sontag wrote about how images make us look and criticized popular culture narratives. Her own life had been traumatized as a child, she had grown up without her father, who died when she was five, and resented her alcohol-addicted mother. Later, her own illness informed *Illness as Metaphor*, in which she revealed the ideology and language distortion of sickness. She was a strong voice in public debate and a harsh critic of cultural complacency throughout her whole life.

**b) Synopsis of *A Lie of the Mind* by Sam Shepard**

Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* is a play first performed at the Promenade Theatre in New York City on December 5, 1985. It explores the collapse of relationships and the psychological effects of violence against a setting of broken families and crushed hopes. The drama examines issues of identity, love, and the devastation caused by tragedy, reflecting the disarray and disillusionment of the American family.

In a deep, wide, dark room with a ramp upstage, The play begins with Jake, a temperamental and emotionally disturbed man, believing he has killed his wife, Beth, after beating her in a fit of jealous rage. Jake withdraws to his family's house, where his mother Lorraine and younger brother Frankie try to take care of him, overcome with anxiety and shame. As Jake swings wildly between sorrow and denial over his behavior, his psyche unravels. Beth, however, is not killed, but suffers a traumatic brain injury that causes her memory loss, prevents speech and transforms her personality into a childlike state. She is brought back to her family's home, where her brother Mike and parents Baylor and Meg struggle to cope with her illness. It is only where Beth has been injured that her family can confront their own emotional failings and unresolved tensions, exposing the disorder that has been haunting them long before. Frankie stops at Beth's family's home to get an idea of how she's been feeling because he was anxious about her well-being. With Beth's brother Mike, an ax-wielding and violently incentivized rage-fuelled killer of both Beth and Jake, this polite turn against him causes friction between the two families. Their mutually inescapable wounds are exposed as they interact. Disgusted with brain damage, domestic abuse,

and the repeated and painful nature of pain, the play's profound central thesis is that Beth's scar represents the fragile nature of identity and the long-term consequences of abuse; Jake's shame and emotional instability demonstrates the damaging impact of unrestrained anger. The families' unwillingness to engage or converse reflects the often disjointed and fragmented relationships felt when trauma strikes.

In conclusion, *A Lie of the Mind* is a chilling portrayal of violence and love in which the potential for healing is shown through the twisted plot and deeply broken characters. The play represents the upheaval and disappointment of the modern American family.

### c) **Synopsis of Postcards by Annie Proulx**

*Postcards*, Annie Proulx's first novel, is set in the middle of the 20th century America. The tale begins in 1944 on a bleak Vermont hillside; it was published in 1992. It follows the story of the eldest son of the Blood family, Loyal.

Loyal Blood, who accidentally kills his girlfriend Billy, while making love, abandons his family. Loyal tells his family that he will leave with Billy to Oregon or Montana. After his departure, everything changed, he has no idea what happened to his family, his father Mink went to a jail and commits suicide, and his mother Jewell has to sell the land, then she sells most of it. At the end Jewell is lost in the snow on Riddle Mountain in New Hampshire. The police find her car, but her body was not. His brother Dub, who loses his arm in an accident with a train, went to jail after he burned the barn with his father. His sister Mernelle is married to Ray Mcway. Loyal's main connection to his pasts is through the postcards that he sends home, which are about what he has done and where he has been, but he did not receive any in return because Loyal does not mention a return address. Each postcard mirrors a missing for his easier life and on his isolation. Each chapter begins with a postcard, some are handwritten, while others are typewritten. Everytime, Loyal tries to build a relationship with a woman, his past haunts him, and causes him repeated panic attacks. His crime makes him incapable of touching a woman. The novel is not only about Loyal Blood, but also discusses the decline of

the ecosystem, a family and the area without the will and bodily strength to endure. Proulx's novel explores themes of isolation, economic desperation, family dynamics. Franklin Witkin who discovered Billy's skeleton while working in the garden, believes that she was a settler's wife, tired of childbearing, or died by typhoid, pneumonia, or milk fever, or possibly scalped and slain by Indians. He reburies her, because he did not want to violate the grave. At the end of the novel, Loyal Blood can not breath and he dies alone. In his last moments, Loyal sees a view of nature through the Indian's book : a field with trees, a wall, wind, grass, sunlight, roots, and rocks.

In conclusion, *Postcards* by Annie Proulx is a novel that tells the story of a man that kills his girlfriend and runs away to avoid his crime, but his past haunts him for the rest of his life.

#### **d) Synopsis of Debriefing by Susan Sontag**

*Debriefing* is a short story from Susan Sontag collection I, etcetera, the story's first edition was in 1978, it explores themes of memory, grieving, and the challenge of processing trauma in a society that frequently avoids it. It also explores the effort to make sense of loss in a disconnected world. An unidentified woman who is struggling with the condition of her close friend Julia tells the story.

According to an unidentified narrator who has known Julia since childhood, she is an emotionally fragile woman whose life is characterized by detachment, depression, and an inability to connect meaningfully with others or with reality itself. Once lively and delicate, Julia now seems to have been broken down by time and mental struggle. She lives a solitary life in New York City, eating barely, rarely leaving her apartment, and becoming more and more introverted. Her philosophical thoughts on abstract issues, reflecting the existential hopelessness felt by others in the city, including three Black women named Doris: Doris I, Julia's maid, who lost her children in a fire. Doris II, whose daughter got bewitched and then worked for Roberta Jorrell, a multi-talented artist and voodoo priestess. And Doris III, whose daughter went in and out several times to jail, trapped in a system of injustice and poverty. The city itself is

depicted as a chaotic, disconnecting place, a "cosmic smudge"; where people look to cults, magic, and conspiracy theories in search of meaning, and where surveillance, violence, and moral ambiguity are accepted. Thoughts on suffering, identity, and human connection spread throughout the story, especially through individuals like Lyle, a previous marvel kid who enters Roberta Jorrell's sphere and eventually got lost in mental illness and addiction, and other people who are fighting to stay true to themselves in the face of intense pressures. The narrator tries to support Julia, encouraging her to engage with the world by attending cultural events like operas and poetry readings, but Julia always refuses. Her health issues accompanied with her mental breakdown, leading to her suicide, resulting in the narrator's sorrow and lasting sadness and guilt, returning to her in her dreams and trying to save her from getting lost.

The narrative examines general themes of survival, the morality of carrying on without the people we love, and continuing search for truth in a broken world, concluding with the narrator's decision to continue on in even though of the suffering, holding on memory, hope, and the possibility for deep human connection in a world characterized by political disillusionment, spiritual emptiness, and alienation.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Marder Elissa. "Trauma and literary studies: Some enabling questions." *Reading on 1*, no.1: 1-6.2006

<sup>2</sup>Felman Shoshana. "The juridical unconscious: Trials and traumas in the twentieth century". Harvard University Press, 2002.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Watson E." OJ Simpson: Tabloidized, Sexualized, Racialized and Largely Despised. *Pimps, Wimps, Studs, Thugs and Gentlemen: Essays on Media Images of Masculinity*", 2009, 258.

<sup>5</sup>Starman Hannah. "The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century." *Women in Judaism* 4, no. 1: 1, 2006.

<sup>6</sup>Felman Shoshana, Dori Laub. "Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history". Taylor and Francis, 1992.

<sup>7</sup>Marder Elissa. "Trauma and literary studies: Some enabling questions." *Reading on 1*, no. 1: 1-6, 2006.

<sup>8</sup>Luckhurst Roger. "The trauma question". Routledge, 2013

<sup>9</sup>Felman Shoshana and Dori Laub. "Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history". Taylor and Francis, 1992, 204-206.

<sup>10</sup>Felman Shoshana, Dori Laub. "Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history". Taylor and Francis, 1992.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Leigh Shane."Understanding Trauma Theory". <https://missionconnectionhealthcare.com/blog/understanding-trauma-theory/>.

<sup>13</sup>Oanh Dang Hoang. "The Concept of Trauma in Literature Viewed from the Transitioning Models of Trauma in the West." VNU Journal of Foreign Studies 37, no. 4: 97-110, 2021.

<sup>14</sup>Cathy Caruth. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History", 1996, <https://joacamillopenna.wordpress.com/content/uploads/2015/03/caruth-unclaimed-experience.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 3-4.

<sup>16</sup>El-Sawy Amany. "Heather Raffo's Solo Performance 9 Parts of Desire: The Traumatic Story of War." Faculty of Education Journal Alexandria University 29, no. 6: 25-50, 2019

<sup>17</sup>Caruth Cathy. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History", 1996, 87-90.

<sup>18</sup>Meretoja Hanna. "Philosophies of trauma." In *The Routledge companion to literature and trauma*. Taylor and Francis, 2020.

<sup>19</sup>Mambrol Nasrullah. "Trauma studies." *Literary theory and criticism* 19, 2018.

<sup>20</sup>Cathy Caruth. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History", 1996.

<sup>21</sup>Oanh Dang Hoang. "The Concept of Trauma in Literature Viewed from the Transitioning Models of Trauma in the West." VNU Journal of Foreign Studies 37, no. 4: 97-110, 2020.

<sup>22</sup>Caruth Cathy, ed. "Trauma: Explorations in memory". JHU Press, 1995, 4-8.

<sup>23</sup>Meretoja Hanna. "Philosophies of trauma." In *The Routledge companion to literature and trauma*. Taylor and Francis, 2020.

<sup>24</sup>Caruth Cathy, ed. "Trauma: Explorations in memory". JHU Press, 1995, 9.

<sup>25</sup>Marder Elissa. "Trauma and literary studies: Some enabling questions." *Reading on 1*, no. 1, 2006: 1-6.

<sup>26</sup>Caruth Cathy."Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History", 1996, 17.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 91.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 91-92.

<sup>29</sup>Visser Irene. "Trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies." *Journal of postcolonial Writing* 47, no. 3 (2011): 270-282.

<sup>30</sup>Cathy caruth. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History", 1996,6

<sup>31</sup>Ibid

<sup>32</sup>Caruth Cathy, ed. "Trauma: Explorations in memory". JHU Press, 1995, 4.

<sup>33</sup>Cathy Caruth. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History", 1996, 4.

<sup>34</sup>Caruth, Cathy, ed. Trauma: Explorations in memory. JHU Press, 1995, 4-5.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid, 5.

<sup>36</sup>Cathy Caruth."Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History", 1996, 56.

### III. Results

In our research paper, we have focused on the study of the Trauma Theory of both Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth, and how it is presented in Annie Proulx's *Postcards*, Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind*, and Susan Sontag's short story *Debriefing*. After discussion, the following are the results we have reached.

The analysis of Annie Proulx's, Sam Shepard's, and Susan Sontag's works demonstrates that trauma is a profound psychological disturbance that impacts the characters after the initial traumatic event, rather than being just a brief or isolated event. Trauma shows itself in each piece as disorientation, emotional weakness, memory blurring, and trouble expressing oneself or speaking. When applying Shoshana Felman's trauma theory, we have revealed the three narratives share the idea that trauma impacts two whole families, transforming individual pain to hurt the collective. This idea is demonstrated in different ways, *Postcards* mirrors how an individual's trauma can affect one whole family, however, in *A Lie of the Mind* it suggest how an individual's trauma can affect both families of the story, lastly, *Debriefing* shows how personal trauma is caused by a disturbed society. Moreover, We have found that the characters reflect a disjointed behavior and a failure to understand their suffering, which mirrors Cathy Caruth's claim that trauma often reappears later and it is difficult to be fully understood. All the three narratives demonstrate the unrepresentability of trauma through the characters who remain silent and do not express their trauma through words. In addition, trauma is not understood by the characters, thus it returns to haunt the survivors in unexpected ways, through flashbacks and dreams, in *Postcards* and in *A Lie of the Mind*, trauma returns only through flashbacks, whereas in *Debriefing* it is through flashbacks and dreams. While *Postcards* and *Debriefing* show that healing is entirely absent, *A Lie of the Mind* suggests that some healing is possible, though it remains unfinished and unstable.

Furthermore, in *A Lie of the Mind*, trauma breaks memory and time, leaving the characters

confused, emotionally lost, and unable to understand what really happened. In *Postcards*, trauma disrupts personal and historical continuity, breaking the Blood family's connection to their past, land, and sense of purpose. In *Debriefing*, trauma erases meaning and distorts memory, leaving characters trapped in emotional paralysis, unable to find reason or redemption in their suffering. Felman's focus on testifying which is also highly present within the narratives, none of the characters clearly talks about his/her trauma; instead, their trauma comes out through silence, anger, or destructive actions. *Postcards* show Loyal's inability to deal with guilt is demonstrated by his silence and frequent travels across America, survival is broken and incomplete. *A Lie of the Mind*, highlights that there is some hope for healing, but it's not complete. In contrast, *Debriefing* shows that healing is completely absent. The above examples demonstrate that trauma in literature is about exposure rather than resolution; it disturbs identity and sets time off harmony, changes the way reality is viewed.

We draw the conclusion that trauma, as depicted in these narratives, never fully heals and instead is still present in the lives of the characters. It disturbs the usual progression of events, ruins relationships, and changes the way the stories are delivered. Ultimately, trauma is more than just a subject in these books; it influences the structure, style, tone, and voice of each narrative.

## **IV. Discussion**

### **1. Chapter One: Understanding Trauma in *A Lie of The Mind***

This chapter explores how Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* depicts trauma as a force that damages both individuals and families. Drawing on Felman's idea of trauma as shared and social, and Caruth's view of trauma as unspeakable and returning through memory, the analysis shows how the play reveals fragmentation, silence, and the struggle for healing.

#### **a) Private Collapse and Public Ruin**

The play deeply illustrates this dynamic in a contrast between individual suffering and that of the entire family in how scars of family tend to be wrapped up in individual suffering as well. The personal histories of the trauma of the characters in *A Lie of The Mind*, like Jake's and Beth's, are symptomatic of deeper societal problems like gender roles, dysfunctional families, and the cycle of violence. The pain experienced by each character is intertwined with their family history and the expectations society has of them. This supports Felman's theory that trauma never occurs in isolation, rather, it is a reflection of larger societal trends<sup>1</sup>.

As seen in Jake's violent act toward Beth is due to his unresolved childhood trauma, especially his bad relationship with his father which is showcased throughout the play, for example Sally says: "Jake decided to kill him"<sup>2</sup>, Sally's account of Jake's thoughts during the incident suggests that Jake harbored his hard feelings or hate toward his father, to the point where he thought he would have killed him. This conveys an engagement that is characterized by unresolved conflict. In contrast to Jake, Beth's inner suffering of having been hurt by her partner, the failure of her family to empathize or understand her only deepens and worsens her situation. Meg and Baylor, her parents, are all types of group failures. Baylor is mostly in denial, emotionally unavailable, and patriarchal. Instead of addressing Beth's illness in a literal manner, he worries about unimportant matters and considers his daughter's condition unworthy to care about. He

said about his daughter: "She can help you. Good for her to help somebody else out for a change. Make her realize she's not the only cripple in this world"<sup>3</sup>. The way he mocks his daughter's condition and makes it as a minor issue aggravate her circumstance. While being more considerate, Meg baby-talks her daughter, never actually granting her independence or talking to her like a mature, thinking person; she never lets her do random things that may help her recover. For instance here:"Here, honey, I'll take it"<sup>4</sup>, not in a bad way but she is just a mother being worried about her daughter. Shepard maintains the way individual and social traumas are complementary rather than distinct. Each person is formed and tortured by the common past to which they belong, and their personal pain mirrors and reflects the general family tragedy. Characters like Sally, Jake's sister, and her mother, Lorraine, represent the impacts of continuous emotional dysfunction and neglect, expressing a collective trauma originating from abandonment and patriarchal dominance. Even Meg, Beth's mother suffers from a type of secondary trauma as a result of her daughter's abuse, emphasizing the way trauma spreads, affecting everyone who is close to the victim. In the play, Shepard demonstrates how trauma is not isolated but rather shared, transmitted and extended across individual and familial boundaries.

#### **b) Family Memory and Disrupted Time**

Sam Shepard demonstrated how trauma deforms identity, memory, and time while resuming the cause-and-effect chain of events<sup>5</sup> throughout the play. Beth sustains brain damage as a result of Jake's brutal attack on her, which causes a primary disconnection that disturbs both characters and warps their relationships and memories. Beth develops an emotional bond with Jake's younger brother Frankie, who attempts to help her deal with the consequences of Jake's behavior, Beth finds her peace around him because he is the one who was really caring for her. Her father, Baylor ignores and minimize her condition. Her mother, Meg talk to her as if she was a baby, while her brother, Mike was screaming all the time even though he was trying to protect her. In addition to her brain injury, she is traumatized more by the chaotic situation

of her family while dealing with her, which makes her want to marry Frankie, her husband's brother. She says to her father while staring at Frankie: "This is my man. This is the one. We're gonna' get married, Daddy. I've decided"<sup>6</sup>. Beth's trauma distorts her ability to make sense of what has happened and what is happening by shattering her sense of linear time and causality and affects her emotional responses and perceptions. Whereas her brain injury affects cognition and speech, where she cannot recognize or understand common things or concepts such as the 'kitchen', and her confusion of where the brain is located, is symptomatic of agnosia.

On the other hand, there is Jake, who is having a conversation with his mother, Lorraine about the way his father died. He says: "No. I don't remember. I don't remember it at all"<sup>7</sup>. Here, trauma disrupts traditional narratives of historical causation<sup>8</sup>, because he keeps denying that, "DON'T TELL ME I ALREADY KNOW SOMETHING I DON'T KNOW! DON'T TELL ME THAT! HOW COULD I KNOW SOMETHING THAT I DON'T KNOW?"<sup>9</sup>. His mother affirms to him that he was there when the accident happened, she stated: "Because you were there, Jake. You were right there with him when it happened"<sup>10</sup>. In this case, trauma disrupts memory.

### c) **Healing**

There's no clean healing, but the play offers chances of resilience and recovery, despite the haunting trauma; marking the failure of testimony and identification. Beth's inability to be truly listened to or heard by her family corresponds with Felman's argument that trauma can't always be expressed in terms of traditional narrative<sup>11</sup>. It often meets with resistance or rejection on the part of others. Not only the uncaring family shatter the process of testimony for Beth, but even her language and speech are broken and interrupted due to her brain injury and her misinterpretation of historical causality. For example, she says: "This-This-This is me. This is me now. The way I am. Now. This. All. Different"<sup>12</sup>. Her speech is almost not clear, she even does not articulate clearly, which makes the process of testimony almost impossible. She also says: "Saah-thah-Jaah-thuh-saah-saah-saah-saah-(continues under)"<sup>13</sup>. Frankie is

Beth's witness, he listens, grieves, and even physically injures himself. He was beaten up by Beth's family to see and care for her wounds. This is significant in trauma theory, especially in the work of Felman and Laub, where healing depends not just on telling trauma but also on being heard by an empathetic witness<sup>14</sup>. But by the conclusion of the play, Beth has not yet been given the full space or consideration she needs to reconstruct her trauma into testimony. She remains suspended, altered, shattered, but still looking for a voice and a listener capable of holding the truth that she embodies. In essence, Beth attempts to testify to her trauma, but never quite succeeds, because her world won't listen. Furthermore, instead of providing Jake with a clear conclusion, Shepard draws an unfinished image of a guy who struggles with the consequences of his acts, unraveled between ruin and hope for survival, which was not reached, despite his chaotic confession at the beginning of the play to his brother Frankie.

This part deals with understanding how difficult it is for individuals to express their wounds, using unclear words, and it did not let them live in peace, because it returns in flashbacks or dreams, and that healing is incomplete. We will understand all of this by applying Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, to Sam Shepard's play *A Lie of the Mind*.

#### **d) The Unexpressed of Pain**

Shepard centers on three characters: Jake, Beth, and Lorraine. He focuses on how each character in this play, lived trauma, and how it affects their lives. The characters demonstrate their trauma through actions, rather than words. This reflects Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma can not be explained<sup>15</sup>. The play opens with the two characters Jake, a jealous man who calls his brother Frankie after the violent act towards his wife Beth. Jake thinks that he killed his wife. In scene 2, Beth, Jake's wife, experiences trauma after the violent act, she is in a hospital, causing her brain damage and her brother Mike tries to calm her. This scene focuses on the injury of Beth, and how she tries to talk, but her words are unclear, in her situation, the injury affects her language. This shows Beth's effort to speak, demonstrating the contrast. She expressed what had happened to her. This aligns with Caruth's idea that trauma can not be

explained<sup>16</sup>: “Saah–thah–Jaah–thuh–saah–saah–saah–saah”, “Ghaah – ghaah– khaah – khaah – khaah – khaah”<sup>17</sup>. In these two lines, Beth wants to say something but she is unable to express it. Her words are unclear. It is hard for her to pronounce a clear word because her trauma is deep. She feels that now, she is different after what happened to her, but she can not explain it clearly. Her repetition of words demonstrates how it is hard for her to express her pain, "This-This, This is me This is me now"<sup>18</sup>. In scene 3, Jake experiences trauma after he hits his wife, Beth, he realizes that she is gone, and Jake tells his brother that he feels a deep fear inside him, he feels that the fear consumes his body, he did not know what was wrong with him. He is afraid that the fear will stay with him for the rest of his life. He notices that losing her is like losing his life. He feels lost, he does not know what to do. Instead of explaining what happened to him, he shows his trauma through fear. In addition, Jake asks help from his sister Sally, to escape to Montana to see Beth. He explains to her how to do it without his mother knowing anything. He wants to make sure that she is alive after he hits her. Before he goes, he feels something in his head, it is like a voice or scream of someone that he knows before, he can not express it clearly and his mind directly goes to Beth. After Jake listens to that screaming, he feels that he has to see her again, it is a sign for him. “A voice I knew once but now it’s changed. . .”<sup>19</sup>. Jake feels pain inside him. He says:“ this thing in my head”, which shows that his trauma resists explanation. He did not explain it clearly. Furthermore, in act three, Jake goes to Montana to apologize to Beth, but Mike forces him and tells him what to say. Jake is unable to speak, he can not express what he feels, because what he did to Beth is unforgettable. “He tries to form the words but falters on them”<sup>20</sup>. In this line, Jake tries to speak with clear words, but he can not. This shows how trauma can not be put into words. In the third act, Lorraine, Jake’s mother also experiences trauma; she feels pain toward her husband because he mistreated her. Although he is dead, she wants to take revenge to calm her distress, because he affected her when he left her. He is still living inside her, so her pain continues. This shows that her trauma is deep, she can not explain it, and she chooses to take revenge because it is not something easy that she can explain. This shows how deep her trauma is and how painful that she can not use the right words to express it.

**e) Delayed Recognition**

Sam Shepard shows the concept of the intersection of knowing and not knowing through the characters who don't understand their traumatic events, and return later in an unexpected way to haunt them, through flashbacks or dreams, and this is the purpose of Sam Shepard to show this play through the characters: Jake, Lorraine and Sally. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is a response to an overwhelming event that is not fully processed or understood at the time it occurs, it returns later in repeated flashbacks, dreams, and other repetitive phenomena<sup>21</sup>.

Scene 1 begins with Jake, recounting to his brother about his violent act towards Beth. But in the moment when the traumatic event happened, he does not understand it, but after, he remembers her face after the violent act. He did not know that it would be that bad, because he hit her in a moment of jealousy and anger.

At the beginning of the play, he seems to be afraid when he recalls her face, he is shocked. Jake tells his brother: "You shoulda' seen her face, Frankie. You shoulda' seen it"<sup>22</sup>; his repetition of the word illustrates that his trauma is returned as a flashback, with the image of her face resurfacing. Moreover, in Act One, Scene Seven, Jake also experiences trauma when he pretends to not remember the death of his father while talking to his mother Lorraine, but he knows because the night his father died he was there. He avoids remembering and facing trauma.

Additionally, in the second act, scene two. Sally is another character who experiences trauma when Jake reminds her of moments of the past, of his father's behavior with her when he gets drunk. However, Sally avoids remembering this, because it hurts her. She says: "What're you tryin' to do"<sup>23</sup>. This shows that her trauma has reappeared again.

In act three, scene one Lorraine also remembers her trauma, when Jake went to Beth in Montana, his mother Lorraine is afraid that something will happen to him, like his father when he left her and died in an accident. She is afraid to suffer from the feeling of loss, and pain. The only thing that comes to her mind, a policeman would come to her and tell her the same thing

that happened to her husband, she said: “Just like before. Just like with his Daddy”<sup>24</sup>.

Furthermore, Jake sees Beth like she’s there with him. He was well for a long time, and suddenly a flashback of his wife hits him in his mind because his brutal act is deeply painful and she haunts him wherever he goes. She did not quit his mind; he saw her everywhere. This is well depicted when he is still on the phone with Frankie, he says: “It’s not a thought.” and, “It’s not a picture either! It’s her. I see her. She’s right here with me now!”. Also: She’s here! She’s right here”<sup>25</sup>; all these lines affirm what Caruth said, trauma returns later, and an individual is never aware of it.

In Act One, Scene Four, Beth also has her trauma returned in a flashback when Mike, her brother, helps her to walk, because she needs that, while they walk suddenly she remembers the moment when Jack hit her and she screams at her brother: “DON’ TUSH ME”, because she thinks it’s Jake, and also she said:” I’M DEAD! DEAD! DAAAAH! HEEZ TOO”<sup>26</sup>. At that moment she thinks that she is dead, she feels that trauma is revived again. In these lines, her trauma returns unexpectedly, through flashbacks. Jake hasn’t left her thoughts.

In Act Three, Scene One, Lorraine’s trauma returns when she tells her daughter Sally the story of her life with her husband. They did everything together, they built a life, raised a family, and shared everything, but one day, without explanation, he left her, and she was left alone, hurt, and confused. It was not something easy to accept and the only thing he left behind was illness, She said: ‘Not him. Some disease he left behind’<sup>27</sup>. This line shows how trauma is hard to explain. After everything they lived together, he left her and caused her disease. This demonstrates how hard to express what she feels, her pain is inside her, and what she said is just a flashback of what she lived.

#### **f) Wounds Without Closure**

*A Lie of The Mind* examines the shattered identities of people who have experienced emotional trauma and abuse in the past. According to Cathy Caruth’s theory of trauma, as presented in *Unclaimed Experience*, the survivor must face the traumatic incident and use a narrative to

express it in order to heal<sup>28</sup>. In this context, Jake is responsible for Beth's brain damage. In Act One, Scene One, he tells his brother Frankie about his violent act, explaining what he did for Beth and why. However, his healing is incomplete, because while telling his brother, at that moment, he is angry, saying that she deserves the violence. Beth, however, stays stuck in her psychological breakdown; even if she has flashbacks of the abuse. She never completely expresses the trauma, which makes integration and recovery impossible. Although Jake's mother Lorraine tells her daughter Sally about her abandonment by expressing her wound and betrayal, her trauma does not heal because her pain continues. She still speaks with anger, and she wants to take revenge on her husband. In addition, Jake's sister Sally, who revived her trauma through Jake's words about past trauma, this shows that her trauma is unhealed and she does not recount it by herself. In the end, Shepard depicts a world in which recovery is difficult and broken and can only occur when trauma is verbalized. A procedure that Caruth believes is necessary for healing<sup>29</sup>.

In this chapter we have demonstrated how relationships are distorted and identity is destroyed by trauma. Shepard shows that familial and personal wounds are difficult to heal and can affect the present through characters like Beth and Jake. Violence, silence, and memory all turn into means for trauma to remerge.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Felman Shoshana. "The juridical unconscious: Trials and traumas in the twentieth century". Harvard University Press, 2002.

<sup>2</sup>Shepard SA. "A Lie of the mind", 1985, 70.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 43.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Kolk Bessel A. "Trauma and memory." *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 52, no. S1: S52-64, 1998.

<sup>6</sup>Shepard SA. "A Lie of the mind", 1985, 82.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 33.

- <sup>8</sup>Denham Aaron R. "Rethinking historical trauma: Narratives of resilience." *Transcultural psychiatry* 45, no. 3 : 391-414, 2008.
- <sup>9</sup>Shepard SAm. "A Lie of the mind", 1985, 34.
- <sup>10</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup>Crawford Rebekah Perkins. "Communicating through and around trauma: Understanding the limitations to narrative and resilience." *Health Communication* 39, no. 11: 2356-2365, 2024.
- <sup>12</sup>Shepard SAm. "A Lie of the mind", 1985, 45.
- <sup>13</sup>Ibid, 11
- <sup>14</sup>Bat-Avi Hagit. "Bearing Witness to the Trauma." *Psychiatric News* 36, no. 22: 24-24, 2001.
- <sup>15</sup>Curtis Amy Stacey. "Expressing trauma: comparing the client's art-making to the artist's work." *Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal* 19, no. 1: 3-11, 2006.
- <sup>16</sup>Sanfelippo Luis César. "Versiones del trauma: Lacapra, caruth y Freud." *Historiografías: revista de historia y teoría* 5: 51-70, 2013.
- <sup>17</sup>Shepard SAm."A Lie of the mind", 1985, 11.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid, 45.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid, 63.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid, 92.
- <sup>21</sup>Cathy Caruth. "Unclaimed experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, 1996, 91.
- <sup>22</sup>Shepard SAm. "A Lie of the mind", 1985,09
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid, 50.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid, 65.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid, 10.
- <sup>26</sup>Ibid, 20.
- <sup>27</sup>Ibid, 68.
- <sup>28</sup>Caruth Cathy. "Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history". JHU press, 2016.
- <sup>29</sup>Caruth Cathy, ed. "Trauma: Explorations in memory". JHU Press, 1995.

## 2. Chapter Two: Understanding Trauma in *Postcards*

In the following section, we will discuss the theme of trauma in Annie Proulx's novel *Postcards*. We begin by applying Shoshana Felman's trauma theory and then move to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. This chapter aims to examine Annie Proulx's characters and their relationship to trauma.

### a) Divided Trauma, Shared Fallout

Proulx's depiction is in perfect harmony with Felman's claim that personal trauma is never really isolated, but always connected to the experiences of others<sup>1</sup>. After Loyal Blood accidentally kills his sweetheart, Billy, he suffers a personal tragedy that affects his family and the town.

Loyal Blood's individual trauma starts at a point of violence that is the originating twist in his life, "Even before he got up he knew he was on his way. Even in the midst of the involuntary orgasmic jerking he knew. Knew she was dead, knew he was on his way. . ."<sup>2</sup>. Instead of confessing and asking for forgiveness, Loyal hides the body and runs away, "He grasped Billy's ankles and dragged her to the wall. He rolled her up under the stone"<sup>3</sup>, opting for silence and disappearance over conflict, he became a transient laborer, moving from job to job across the American West, refusing intimacy he says: "Touching the women. If it wasn't Billy it wouldn't be any one else"<sup>4</sup>, evading roots, and avoiding self-examination. His only means of contact with his family are mysterious postcards that are free from any personal information and never include a return address; this is a symbol of emotional severance and fear of confronting.

His trauma is highlighted when his guilt manifests as physical symptoms, such as asthma-like attacks during emotional or sexual intimacy. "Loyal wore his respirator for a while"<sup>5</sup>; he suffered emotionally and physically from his trauma.

Loyal's brutality does not affect only his person, but spreads through all of his family members, his father, Mink Blood, seems to be strong on the outside, but deep down he is broken

by his son's sudden departure, financial crisis, and the collapse of the farm. In the end, he becomes quiet and bitter.

For the mother Jewell Blood, her trauma appears in her silence, not only suffering from the unexpected departure of her son Loyal, but also from her cold and distant husband, who doesn't offer comfort, and from her sorrow at her son Marvin Dub due to his missing arm during an accident. Additionally, her trauma increased by her husband's death:

The night of the day they told her about Mink she got her pillow from their bed and took it into the spare room with its iron bed painted white, its flowery coverlet, the braided rug in all colors. The bed was hard, but its strangeness seemed correct. Silent deep as coal. When she woke in the morning to the pattern of light on the faded wall, the scent of sachet from the little embroidered bag under the pillow, she was already in her different life.<sup>6</sup>

Here, Jewell remains silent which shows the depth of her trauma. Reminding her that things will never be the same, because her husband is dead. She took her pillow and went to sleep in another room, this indicates that she can not face the pain she feels.

Marvin Dub, was also touched by his brother's sudden departure and was also traumatized by his accident which led to him losing his arm, which later caused him paralysis like, he could not do things by himself since he was loaded with farm responsibilities. As for the sister, Mernelle, she becomes emotionally unstable, wondering about her brother Loyal who left suddenly. She suffers a nervous breakdown as the entire family did from the economic crisis and the decline of the farm, she also survived a hard sorrow due to her father's death. Loyal's trauma reverberates through all the Blood family.

## **b) Buried Violence and Historical Disruption**

By proving that trauma necessitates a particular model of comprehending history that considers hidden facts, delayed reactions, and non-linear effects<sup>7</sup>, *Postcards* supports Shoshana Felman's thesis. It shows that history is not just shaped by personal choices, but that those choices are also shaped by larger historical forces beyond our control. Annie Proulx breaks up the traditional, linear understanding of historical causality by presenting trauma as a force that

warps time, breaks the flow of stories, and changes the path of both personal and societal history, and that is well depicted through the character Loyal Blood, who has been traumatized from unintentionally killing his love. He is unable to contribute to the logical development of his own life because he is incapable of facing his shame or expressing his trauma. He even lied to his family when he decided to quit the house, that he was going to go with Beth, who died. He says: “Billy and me has had enough of this place. We’re pullin’ out tonight. She’s waitin’ for me right now”<sup>8</sup>. This personal paralysis reflects the historical dislocation and fragmentation that many Americans went through in the middle of the 20th century. He becomes a ghostly presence who wanders across America without direction or closure. His act causes him to become dislocated, alienating him from his family, “The price for getting away. No wife, no family, no children, no human comfort in the quotidian of his life”<sup>9</sup>, his history, and the story that used to give his life purpose. He was once stable with his life, he follows the traditional American values of expansion, hard work, and independence, but his guilt makes him a wanderer, losing faith in the idea that there is a clear path in life or that decisions always have obvious outcomes. Loyal says: “I got to go,”. “I got to. Oregon or Montana-somewhere”<sup>10</sup>. Trauma had destabilized the entire Blood family’s relationship with history. The father, Mink, who believed in the land as a source of pride and security, loses faith once Loyal leaves and the farm fails, “The weight of the work without Loyal pressed them close.”<sup>11</sup>. A world where hard work leads to failure destroys him. His son is gone, and the land no longer supports him, and by the end of the story, he has become mute and frustrated. Jewell feels the break from the past through being emotionally abandoned. She tries to stick to her role as a caring mother and keeper of the family, but Loyal’s leaving and her husband’s coldness leave her lost. The old ways no longer make sense or help her feel better. Being emotionally weak, Mernelle feels lost in a world where the land, which used to have value, now only causes her sorrow. Even her brother Marvin Dub, who loses his arm, reflects how the family itself has been broken and detached from its past.

### c) **Endurance Without Wholeness**

In *Postcards* by Annie Proulx, survival is portrayed as a broken, incomplete transformation, an unstable process of simply surviving through pain; rather than as healing or wholeness. The protagonist, Loyal Blood, from the moment of destruction of the accidental act of killing his lover, instead of confession or healing, decides to escape from declaring his act and sends heartless postcards home as a representation of a chaotic, unsuccessful attempt at testimony. Loyal's silence is not passive, it's a protective behavior that protects him from the unbearable weight of his actions, but it also ensures that healing, connection, and redemption stay out of reach forever. His inability to testify his trauma, to speak it, own it, or return home condemns his family and himself to lives characterized by loss, disintegration, and absence. What Felman refers to as the failure of testimony<sup>12</sup>, it illustrates how trauma fractures language and makes self-representation not possible; and leaves the survivor unable to narrate the event that defines them. The same thing is seen throughout the rest of the Blood family, they are stuck in destructive cycles of emotional isolation, repression, and silence that keep them far away from healing; nobody in the family discusses their suffering openly. Each one of them suffers privately and separately, Mink reacts by becoming emotionally detached and ultimately taking his own life, Jewell doesn't fight back or discuss her sorrow; instead, she accepts it, especially after her husband Mink's death. Marvin Dub who's working hard all the time and never shows his emotions, Mernelle's thoughts and feelings are overwhelmed by trauma, and she's unable to handle it. No one is attempting to testify or explain their trauma, either individually or collectively. Through Loyal's failure to testify and his family falling apart, Proulx shows us how staying silent has serious consequences and how important it is to face and recognize trauma, even when it's hard to.

This part will deal with Cathy Caruth's ideas about trauma, and will explain how trauma affects individuals, make them speechless in Annie Proulx's novel *Postcards*.

#### d) The Unspeakable

Annie Proulx illustrates the unrepresentability of trauma in *Postcards* through the characters who suffer, and find it difficult to talk about their traumatic experiences, demonstrating how trauma often resists expression by showing it through silence, rather than words.

Loyal Blood, the eldest son of the Blood family, experienced trauma after the accidental killing of his girlfriend Billy while trying to make love to her; he didn't expect her to die, so he was shocked. At that moment, he couldn't breathe. His legs felt weak like he had fallen. He was confused and couldn't see clearly. This shows how his body reacts to the trauma caused by his brutality, "He couldn't get any air, but stood on his knocked-out legs gasping and wheezing. It was like he'd taken a bad fall. Dazed"<sup>13</sup>.

After the painful event, he hid Billy's body under a stone because he was afraid to remember what he had done. Seeing her might bring back the trauma. Loyal avoids looking at her face. He was so shocked that he couldn't feel his legs, "He rolled her up under the stone, could not look at her face"<sup>14</sup>; "No feeling in his legs"<sup>15</sup>.

Also, Loyal did not express his emotional pain, instead he turned it to work to avoid facing what had happened, "Instinctively he translated the withering shock into work, his answer to what he did not want to understand"<sup>16</sup>. Loyal decides to leave his family, but he does not reveal the reason for his departure which shows that his trauma is unrepresentable. His repeated words indicate that there is something deep that he can not explain, "I got to go." "I got to. Oregon or Montana—somewhere"<sup>17</sup>.

Loyal also experienced childhood trauma when he was three years old. He slipped in fresh manure, and all the milk spilled. His father, Mink, got angry, slapped him, and yelled at him. Loyal stayed silent. He didn't talk about what happened. He kept his feelings inside, "The milk all spilled when he slid in fresh manure. Mink had slapped him halfway across the barn. "I'll learn you to watch your goddamn step! Don't spill the milk!", "Loyal's broken nose had swelled up to the size of a hen's egg"<sup>18</sup>.

Furthermore, the traumatic act left him deeply affected. He can't be close to a woman anymore. Loyal says that whenever he starts to feel interested in a woman, he has asthma attacks because of something he did in the past. He doesn't explain what it was and stays silent about it "There's something. I choke—like a kind of bad asthma—if I get around them too close. If I get interested in them. You know. Because of something that happened long ago. Something I did"<sup>19</sup>. This shows how his trauma is deep and resists explanation. Loyal Blood's journey ends with his death, alone.

Jewell Blood, Loyal's mother, experienced trauma when she saw her father's barn burn down with all the cows and horses inside. She also saw her older brother's body being taken out from a wall after he died. When she tells the story, she starts with silence and shudders. Her body moves and she clears her throat. This shows how hard it is for her to talk about it, "She told the story in a certain way. Cleared her throat. Began with silence"<sup>20</sup>.

In addition, Jewell also kept her pain, when her son Marvin lost his arm, she could not look into his face, she stayed outside, crying. She hid her pain inside her and never spoke about it. "My mother never went into that room once. Just stayed out in the parlor fainting and crying by turns"<sup>21</sup>. Jewell feels pain after she hears the news about Mink, "she got her pillow from their bed and took it into the spare room"<sup>22</sup>, this action shows how she feels sadness, she chooses to be alone because it is hard for her to confess her feelings. The line "she was already in her different life"<sup>23</sup>; Jewell Blood's story ends with her being lost on Riddle Mountain in New Hampshire.

Marvin Blood, known as Dub, Loyal's younger brother, experiences trauma after losing his arm in an accident. When it happened, he could only say unclear words. He couldn't express his pain at that moment, he only said: " unnnh, unnnh"<sup>24</sup>. After what Marvin went through, there are things he can't do on his own. In the novel, when he tries to open a pint with one hand, he can't do it. He needed someone to help him. "It was hard, opening the pint with just one hand (..) twisted until his fingers cramped"<sup>25</sup>, this shows how hard it is to live with one arm because Marvin did not expect that to happen to him. Although he suffered, he did not tell anyone, he just kept it inside him. Dub wears a prosthesis, he avoids using its name, and he

compares it to a nasty poison snake, this avoidance indicates that he does not like them, he does not feel comfortable in them. His refusal to use its name shows how hard it is for him to accept his injury, “ I hate to say it, too. ‘Prosthesis’. Sounds like a nasty poison snake. ‘He was bit by a prosthesis’<sup>26</sup>. Later, Dub changes his life. After being in jail, he becomes rich and lives in Miami, despite everything he went through.

Mernelle, Loyal youngest sister, isolates herself after her father’s death. She spent most time in her room, and quit school. She felt the absence of her father, his death was heavy on her, she even did not share her sorrow with her mother, because she could not explain what she felt, and she avoided talking with anyone, “Mernelle has got something up her sleeve. Not telling me a thing (... ) She took what happened hard. Quit school when they come for Mink. Since he passed on she hardly says anything”<sup>27</sup>.

#### **e) Fractured Awareness**

Annie Proulx shows trauma through the characters who experienced trauma but they did not understand it, rather it returns later often as flashbacks. The only character whose trauma returns later is Loyal Blood. After Loyal hides Billy’s body, he suddenly remembers the fingernails. This flashback takes him back to his past. He quickly avoids it, he doesn’t want to remember, “A gleaming image of her fingernails swerved into his mind and he clamped it off”<sup>28</sup>.

Moreover, Loyal remembers everything that happened around him, but he feels confused and doesn’t fully understand the traumatic event when he hides Billy’s body, “ He saw and heard everything with brutal clarity; yet the thing that had happened up beside the wall was confused ”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, when Loyal leaves, he stops to take one last look at his home, and suddenly a flashback of what happened comes back to him, “ But jammed the spurting flashes of what had happened. Had happened and was done.”<sup>30</sup>. On New Year’s Eve, he went to a bar with Elton and Foot, who worked at the next stations on the line. Loyal remembers Billy when he touches a woman in the bar. For him, the only woman he can touch is Billy. The moment he touches someone else, his pain comes back, “It was the touching. Touching the woman. If it

wasn't Billy it wouldn't be anyone else"<sup>31</sup>. In Little Falls, Minnesota there was a tornado, and Loyal was affected by it. After the disaster, he goes back to his past in his mind. He remembers a moment from before. He imagines himself back on the farm, crushed under the stone, calling out to Billy for help because he's hurt. He feels like she's really there again. "He thought he was on the farm, crushed under the stone wall and stretched out his hand to ask Billy to help him"<sup>32</sup>. Loyal remembered Billy, like a film playing jerking through a projector in his mind. His trauma returned as a flashback, "The last time with Billy replayed like a cracked film jerking through a projector"<sup>33</sup>. Loyal remembers Billy and how she died. She was fighting to protect herself from him. He used to think that her fighting meant she loved him. Only now does he understand what really happened, "And now he knows: in her last flaring seconds of consciousness, her back arched in what he'd believed was the frenzy of passion but was her convulsive effort to throw off his killing body"<sup>34</sup>. Loyal writes a question that says: "Was everything all right with him before Billy?"<sup>35</sup> in a spiral-bound notebook, his trauma returns, and he realizes the painful truth.

#### **f) Lack of Healing**

In Annie Proulx's *Postcards* none of the characters narrates their painful events, each one hides them inside. As we rely on Cathy Caruth's idea about the notion of healing<sup>36</sup>, the victim should tell his traumatic event. Starting with the main character, Loyal Blood, who killed his girlfriend Beth, he chooses to escape instead of talking and informing his family about his act. He remains silent, and his pain continues until his death. Also, Loyal's mother Jewell, who lived in deep sadness and emotional pain, holds it in, therefore she does not heal either.

Moreover, Marvin, who had an accident resulting in losing his arm, suffers from trauma, he adapts to live his life without the ability to use both arms. However, he did not speak about his horrible feelings. Finally, Mernelle, the youngest child who is affected by losing her father, also does not narrate her feelings. To conclude, the concept of healing, as Cathy Caruth argued, is not present in *Postcards*.

This chapter emphasizes how trauma gets carried through the generations, and how deep emotional collapse occurs in the rest of Loyal's family as a result of his violent act and his inability to face it.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Carbonell Joyce L and Charles R Figley. "When trauma hits home: Personal trauma and the family therapist." *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 22, no. 1: 53-58, 1996.

<sup>2</sup>Annie Proulx. "Postcards", 1992, 13. <https://a.co/d/7FVpLMP>

<sup>3</sup>Ibid,14.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 69.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 105.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 153.

<sup>7</sup>Felman Shoshana and Dori Laub. "Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history". Taylor and Francis, 1992.

<sup>8</sup>Annie Proulx. "Postcards", 1992, 20.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 69.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 22

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 29.

<sup>12</sup>Felman Shoshana and Dori Laub. "Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history". Taylor and Francis, 1992, 03

<sup>13</sup>Annie Proulx. "Postcards", 1992, 13.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, 14.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 22.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 28.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 203.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 50.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 51.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, 153.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 50.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 56.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid,60.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 139.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid,15.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 24.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, 69.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 77.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 95.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 111.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid, 161.

<sup>36</sup>Caruth Cathy. "Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history". JHU press, 2016, 56.

### **3. Chapter Three: Understanding Trauma in *Debriefing***

This chapter deals with comprehending how trauma in Susan Sontag's short story *Debriefing* influences individuals because each one of them has their own traumatic event, through applying Shoshana Felman's theory, and Cathy Caruth's theory.

#### **a) Individual Trauma, Collective Collapse**

In *Debriefing*, Susan Sontag demonstrates how the public and the personal are inseparable by combining both private and collective trauma into a single fabric of psychological and sociopolitical disillusionment. The story shows how private pain is worsened by collective trauma, and in turn, individual stories of hopelessness are a reflection of the wider harm done to the community, revealing a circular relationship in which societal settings continue to increase personal suffering, making healing impossible. Julia the narrator's closest friend, her personal trauma manifests through chronic depression, eating disorders, and emotional association. Her constant struggles with weight loss and self-starvation expose an immense disorder within as she uses anorexia to try to control her suffering. As her mental state worsens, she is cursed by suicide ideas, frequently picturing herself plunging into the river. However, she uses humor and a comic side to hide her pain; her fragile behavior, loneliness, and inability to leave her apartment indicate a weakening and failing mental state. Her nervous relationship with her psychiatrist highlights an intense sense of weakness and anxiety for her well-being. Julia's trauma is indeed personal, but her pain is revealed against a larger backdrop of societal collapse including an increase in urban violence, inflation, spiritual disorientation, and the breakdown of political idealism. Julia's isolation from everyday life and the normalization of her sorrow reflect a society in which survival itself seems unsure. At the end of the story Julia committed suicide, a terrible mixture of personal suffering and collective despair.

Lyle, at the age of nineteen, has experienced severe personal suffering in the past. His early success was chased by experiences like taking acid, temporarily losing his sight, he was sent by

his parents twice to a psychiatric institution, and attempting suicide three times, this individual trauma of Lyle is portrayed next to the narrator's demonstration of the city, she said: 'This city is neither a jungle nor the moon nor the Grand Hotel. In long shot: a cosmic smudge'<sup>1</sup>; she means the city feels meaningless, cold and like nothing makes sense in it.

The three Black Dorises, who each symbolize distinct aspects of societal pain originating from racism, class, and structural injustice, are the most visible examples of this connection. Doris I, Julia's maid, is a woman whose source of emotional trauma is due to the tragic death of her two children in a house fire; she bears this grief in silence, without tears, but it affects every aspect of her existence. Even though Doris doesn't cry, her house is filled with memories of her dead children. Her trauma is personal, but it is shaped by racial mistreatment and poverty. Her loss is reflective of a broader trend of societal neglect, as she lived in a ruined apartment in a forgotten area of the city; she was let down just like many others have been. Her crying in the taxi highlights her severe personal loss within the urban suffering. Also, there is Doris II, the mother of a daughter who is bewitched by Roberta Jorrell, a powerful Black feminist-oodoo figure, not heard from her daughter for seven years. Doris's loss isn't just maternal but symbolic, reflecting more profound cracks brought on by opposing identities, cultural shifting, and seeking of meaning in a damaged society. Whereas Doris III is the mother of a daughter who is jailed multiple times due to her sex work, stuck in poverty and social injustice cycles. Her daughter's continuing trauma is deeply inherited and increasing, revealing the societal brutality that Black women and their families have to deal with. The suffering of entire communities broken apart by a system of discrimination can be seen in these women's experiences, which are not just private tragedies.

Finally, the anonymous narrator watches the emotional decline of Julia with a mix of care, bitterness, and sorrow. Despite seeming to be in control, the narrator is also impacted; her desire to recall, explain, and 'debrief' herself from suffering turns into an excuse for her emotional and moral tiredness. The narrator recognizes the unbreakable link between societal breakdown and personal suffering.

Sontag has well depicted that every character's collapse is influenced by a chaotic, disorderly, and lonely public world. This demonstrates how trauma is both very personal and a part of a broader, collective experience in a culture where meaning is gone and simply surviving feels like a struggle.

**b) Disrupted memory**

The narrative depicts trauma as not only existing within individuals but also reverberating throughout time and space, influencing relationships, identities, and reality perspectives. For example, Julia represents a form of existential trauma that extends beyond her current situation. Her emotional detachment, physical weakness, and especially her concern with non-important issues such as the meaning of the placement of the two leaves, she said: 'Oh, I might start wondering about the relation of that leaf'<sup>2</sup>; that shows an intense desire for reasons that the world no longer offers. Trauma has reshaped her historical causality and that is what explains her gradual stopping of eating, and her rejection to quit her apartment. Her unwillingness or incapacity to participate in simple daily activities shows a rejection of the belief that individual actions can affect the events of history. Julia has endured so much suffering that she is no longer able to interact with life, which led to her suicide. Lyle's act of burning, 'as he's burned everything he's written since he was fifteen'<sup>3</sup>, represents a deep rejection of his past, a failure to create a coherent personal history, and an unwillingness to accept the causal development of his own life.

The three Dorises are each marked by the loss of children through fire, abandonment, or imprisonment. Doris I, she lost her children in a fire and is now living among their possessions because she is refusing to leave the apartment where they died, and this makes her stuck with the past and unwilling to deal with her present and future. Doris II, meets her daughter after seven years due to her bewitching, suggesting a causal relationship based on a powerful or supernatural force (bewitchment), rather than a simple choice. Doris III is powerless to interrupt her daughter being imprisoned multiple times, her trauma has wiped out all chance for improvement or

redemption.

The storyteller's experience of trauma including seeing Julia disintegrating and finally commit suicide, and watching other characters struggle without receiving any sort of help, opposes her belief in absolute cause and effect. She attempts to link her suffering to historical events, but nothing works well. Rather than discovering meaning, she encounters chaos and hopelessness. Her experiences of trauma reveal that history is not a continuous range of reason, but rather a tangle of isolated pain that reason is unable to heal.

### c) **Critical Survival**

Healing in a renewing sense is indeed absent, or presented as uncertain in the story. Julia, Julia is isolated and silent, fails to move from destruction to survival, she well exemplifies the idea that Felman calls the failure of testimony<sup>4</sup>, where trauma is so severe that it shatters language and blocks storytelling. Her suicide is the last solution for her, an unwillingness or weakness to express the unspeakable. Lyle, on the other hand, who was a brilliant child writer, falls into collapse due to drug use, and mental health struggles. He loses his motivation and he feels aimless and his life becomes meaningless. He hardly interacts with others, because he is afraid that Roberta Jorrell bewitch him, who may bring him closer to destruction even though they appear to offer purpose.

Whereas, for the Dorises (I, II, and III), their testimonies are never completely expressed, Doris I's preserving her children's objects as memories rather than words and expressing her pain, affirms the unspeakableness of trauma, but also it is the thing that shapes her continued existence. Yet her surrounding with her past objects which remind her about her loss make her healing impossible. Doris II, even if healing seems ambiguous, she did an act of agency which is facing her daughter's keeper (Roberta Jorrell), reflecting a brave engagement to restore what was lost. Doris III, like the other Dorises fails to have a coherent narration or testimony, however, her constant presence walking the streets of the city, carrying a brown bag, and looking for her daughter, a mother still trying to stay connected, serves as a restrained as well as a strong kind

of witness.

Finally, the narrator is distracted by the suffering of others and frustrated by her inability to save Julia, surviving by taking on the role of a witness. For all these characters, survival is not about becoming full again, but about keeping living, grabbing for a voice, claiming recollection, or just persevering, even without release.

#### **d) Failed Expression**

Susan Sontag in *Debriefing* shows the unrepresentability of trauma through the characters who have difficulty expressing their painful experiences. Their trauma resists explanation and is expressed through silence rather than words. The main characters who experienced trauma are Julia, Doris I, Lyle and the narrator.

Julia, the narrator's friend, is not a person who recounts her life. She hides her pain all the time, with a laugh, she does not talk to anyone, and she prefers silence about what happened to her because it is hard for her to express what she feels. Not all the words can explain her sadness. She didn't go out, she isolated herself in her room. Her body is weak because she stops eating. In the end, she commits suicide and ends her life. This shows that Julia's trauma is deep and unspoken, which aligns with the unrepresentability of trauma. It is difficult to express her sadness which supports the idea that trauma is complex to communicate.

Doris I, Julia's maid, is a black woman who experienced a tragic event, she lost her two small children in a fire that destroyed their two-room apartment. She accepts that with silence, without saying a word, dry-eyed, because her pain is hard to recount, it is inside her, and remains silent. Although she did not speak about her pain, when she was in a taxi, she cried, because she could not hold it in. This shows how deep her trauma is, a trauma that resists explanation. After the traumatic event, Doris decorated her living room with their photos, toys and clothes. Memories are the only thing that she has left for her.

Doris II is also a maid, who experiences trauma. For seven years she had no news from her daughter, who was bewitched by the Queen of the Black Arts, Roberta Jorrell. She remains

silent for this long period, and she does not express her pain.

Doris III, when her daughter is jailed for sex work, her trauma is present but she does not express it. Lyle, another character who experienced trauma, at only nineteen years old, tries to commit suicide three times, his parents sent him to a psychiatric institution, taking acid. After all these horrible conditions that he went through, he stayed silent, and he never explained his pain, showing that his pain is intense and unable to express it. Lyle's trauma is unrepresentable, which aligns with Cathy Caruth's idea.

The narrator is close to Julia, she is her friend, and she always advises her not to do something bad to herself such as committing suicide. She always checks on her and cares about her. After Julia's death, she becomes sad, and she expresses her pain when she says: "Your death is heavier"<sup>5</sup>; the narrator struggles to find the words to explain how hard it is to accept the death of Julia, and he did not expect that she would die this way. For her, Julia did not have to die, she knew that she was suffering but she did not realize how deep it was. Her pain is hidden. She is afraid because she's now alone and has to survive without Julia. She remains strong, but she is deeply in pain.

Sontag has depicted every character with his experience of trauma. Showing how trauma is hard to express. The characters are unable to put into words their pain, instead, they remain silent.

#### **e) Deferred Understanding**

Susan Sontag shows the intersection of knowing and not knowing through the characters who did not understand their traumatic experiences, rather their trauma returns later to haunt them, in unexpected ways through flashbacks and dreams. The narrator and Julia go to a performance of *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the old Met, the heroine says: "Ne me touchez pas! Ne me touchez pas!"<sup>6</sup>. Julia begins to 'shudder'<sup>7</sup>, indicating that the performance reminds her of a flashback or a feeling from the past, she is affected by the woman saying that sentence in French, it seems like the scene reminded her of something, but she doesn't mention it, she claims to be bored,

although that is not truly the case. The performance reminds her of a feeling from the past. Additionally, the narrator repeatedly dreams of Julia after her death. In the dream, she grabbed her by her long hair to stop her from jumping into the river. In another dream, Julia is in the river, and the narrator pulls her out by her hair. This dream shows that she hasn't forgotten her. It's a painful reminder, especially because before her death, she tried to convince her not to take her own life. The dreams reflect her inability to accept her death, and it reveals how her trauma resurfaces through these recurring dreams. After Julia's death, the narrator tries to understand what led her to commit suicide, she cannot make sense of it.

#### **f) Unfinished Healing**

Trauma is unhealed in the narrative, as Cathy Caruth claims when survivors share their traumatic experiences, which is an essential step toward healing, and the importance of having a good listener<sup>8</sup>. In this short story, Julia's trauma is unhealed because she ends her life, and she does not share her pain. In addition, Doris I, her trauma is unhealed because she did not forget the death of her small children, and doesn't even recount her trauma to somebody. Furthermore, Lyle tried to suicide three times, and his trauma also has not healed, he is stuck and refuses to share his trauma. Doris II's pain is not healed because she remains silent and she does not share her feelings. Doris III, who lived through trauma because of her daughter, also does not narrate her feelings. Finally, the narrator who suffers after the death of Julia, her pain continues, she is haunted by the memory of her friend's suicide.

This chapter demonstrates how trauma affects language itself as much as it does for lives. Sontag writes the story in a broken and confusing way to show how the characters' minds are. This fragmentation, sense of loss, and alienation also relates to U.S society during that period; it was difficult for many, and led to what has been called a "collective nervous breakdown"<sup>9</sup>. She doesn't give clear or happy endings. The characters don't heal, they are just living. The story shows how hard it is to truly communicate deep suffering, and how trauma leaves a mark that

doesn't fade.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Susan Sontag. "Debriefing", 1978, 03, <https://a.co/d/3AAdtAc>.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 01.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 17.

<sup>4</sup>Felman Shoshana, Dori Laub. "Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history". Taylor and Francis, 1992.

<sup>5</sup>Susan Sontag. "Debriefing", 1978, 19.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 07.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Caruth Cathy. "Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history". JHU press, 2016.

<sup>9</sup>Rolsky, L.B.(2020). The 1970s. In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History.

## V. General Conclusion

To sum up, our analysis of Annie Proulx's, Sam Shepard's, and Susan Sontag's works explored how the theme of trauma is shown in *Postcards*, *A Lie of the Mind*, and *Debriefing*. Throughout our study, we have relied on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to discuss the idea that trauma is unexpressed, and haunts survivors unexpectedly. Healing from trauma is hard. We also apply Shoshana Felman's trauma theory to show how personal trauma can become a collective pain. Also, how trauma reshapes and suggests new understanding of history by highlighting the fact that trauma still affects the present and it is not just a thing of the past. Finally, the process from destruction to survival.

We start with Shoshana Felman's trauma theory, in which the narrators illustrate in these three works, how individual trauma can become a collective pain. While, all three authors share the same idea, each narrator presents it differently. Annie Proulx indicates that trauma breaks the characters' values and does not let them live peacefully. Susan Sontag explores how trauma affects the relationships and identities. Sam Shepard shows that trauma affects the memory of the characters and how it changes them. Finally, all three narrators explain that wound is hard to heal, although Sam Shepard suggests little hope of recovery.

Continuing with Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the three authors Annie Proulx, Sam Shepard, and Susan Sontag, each illustrate characters who can not explain their painful events, choosing silence instead of talking about it. Moreover, all three narrators show that trauma haunts individuals by returning through flashbacks and dreams, and making it feel present although it is from the past. At last, they explain that the process of healing is not achieved in these three works.

The texts show how the characters' relationships are affected by trauma, and this is related to U.S society. The literary phenomenon that the texts dealt with is the theme of trauma, to demonstrate how the lives of the individuals are destroyed by the traumatic experiences. In these narratives none of the characters have reported the traumatic event they experienced. Except

Sam Shepard in his play *A Lie of the Mind*, who indicated that one of his characters Jake talked about his pain, but his healing was incomplete. Many stories of trauma in literature are taken from real life events.

In the end, this study demonstrates that trauma in literature is a structural force that alters narrative, disrupts identity, and challenges the concept of healing itself, rather than only being a psychological wound.

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